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BY

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&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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SIR ROBERT SHIRLEY, BART.

CHAPTER I.

TINY FOOTSTEPS.

A STEEP grey wall of limestone, polished like marble in some parts by the wash of the waves ; a smooth pavement of sea-sand forming the floor of the irregular horseshoe of the bay ; to the north a jutting rocky headland, weed-draped and wild ; to the south a caverned cliff, scooped into fantastic grottoes by the impact of many thousand tides ; in front a dark blue line, where the

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summer sea seemed to lie asleep, heaving softly, while the white-winged gulls skimmed and shrieked over its slowly rippling surface—such was the scene.

It was a pretty spot enough. The Norsemen who had drawn up their pirate galley there of old had called the place Odin's Horseshoe. It lay convenient for the purpose of their forays, since there was a gentle slope at one point, leading to a cleft in the towering cliff-wall, up which a broad path, almost a road, gave easy access to the fertile country inland.

Just above high-water mark, among huge boulders that had rolled in a landslide of forgotten ages from above, seated on a fragment of rock, reading, was a young woman, neatly attired, and whose vocation in life might have been guessed, even had not an empty child's-carriage

stood beside her, and a child's form been discernible at some little distance, playing among the loose sand-heaps and water-worn stones, and shallow pools haunted by tiny crabs and star-fish and glistening jelly-fish left behind by the ebb-tide, that lay between her and the black, projecting promontory that stretched grimly out to seaward.

The novel which the girl was reading—one of those gaudily-bound two-shilling works of fiction that one sees on railway bookstalls—was to all appearance a deeply interesting one, since she seldom found time to throw a cursory glance at her charge, now straying and playing afar off among the pools and the rocks, encrusted with limpets and weed—red, green, orange, purple; while, as regarded the signs of the weather, she was utterly blind and heed-

less. The day was fine: it was hot, still, summer weather. And yet the climate of our island is proverbially fickle, and on that Yorkshire coast, as on the sandier and flatter coasts of Lincoln and Norfolk, the German Ocean has a trick of running in like a racehorse at fullest speed when wind and tide serve. But probably the nursemaid—an attendant, evidently, in some wealthy household, as might be guessed from her dress, from that of the fair young child now straying on tiny feet ever further and further away from the dry, loose sand, and the prosaic board that gave notice as to the illicit removal of sand and shingle from the foreshore without the consent of the Admiralty, indicated—knew no more of the sea than could be learnt from Brighton beach or the pier at Herne Bay. Yet the wind had

freshened. There was a darkling line to seaward that, to experienced eyes, boded mischief. The blue of the summer sky was cloaked by a huge semi-transparent veil of thready vapour, like a giant winding-sheet. Even in the very foam-bells as they went racing past, even in the low menace of the rising surf, even in the shriller cry and more petulantly flapping wings of the restless sea-birds, there was warning.

But sometimes such warnings are thrown away. The wind gained strength; so did the tide. The cloud-bank crept stealthily on. Hoarser and louder grew the noise of the waves when some low reef of blackened rocks barred their progress. Yes, the great sea was coming in with swifter, longer strides than were common. The wind freshened in unison with the rush

of the tide. Neptune and Æolus were, for once, of a mind. Little of this recked the girl who sat there alone too much absorbed by the sorrows of an imaginary heroine, by the struggles of a fictitious hero, to heed the anger of the coming storm. Higher and higher, like a wrathful snake upreared, rose the foamy crest of each pellucid wave. Louder grew the moan of the breeze, hoarser the sullen splash of the breakers. Yet she read on complacently.

Fast, fast the tide was coming in: not inch by inch, foot by foot, as on our steep and shingly southern shores of England, but with racing speed, sending its skirmishers before it, in the shape of tongues of white water that darted insidiously into hollows, and quickened muddy sloughs, and turned runlets into tidal streams, and

at last advancing as a low, blue wall topped with frothy foam, and hissing as it came. The nursemaid, intent on her novel, was quite unaware of the danger at hand. It was not, strictly speaking, a danger to her. She was in no bodily peril. On such a day as this, the tide might very probably reach as far as high-water mark; but beyond that mark, calculated on a long series of averages, the flood was not likely to reach, and above it was the sloping under-cliff and the broad, safe road down which the perambulator had been impelled so easily. A pretty toy-carriage this, with its crimson-silk cushions and silvered axles—a costly little bit of the coach-builder's work. No, the handmaiden, only let her stay where she was, incurred no risk, however the strong sea might rise and the wild wind blow. But the child?

Further, and further yet, the tiny figure had strayed away from the side of the careless attendant, hidden now and again by some cairn of weed-crustcd rocks, or by some post of sturdy, blackened wood, from the broken top of which the green sea-grass hung, long and dank, like the hair of a mermaid. It was a case to exemplify the old homely proverb which teaches us that out of sight is too often out of mind. The wind rose, and so did the sea. Gull and gannet swooped and screamed over the foamy expanse of incoming water. Far off, on lonely rocks that rose like watch-towers above the wave, perched the black cormorant, scanning the rushing waters, and intent on prey. Still unobserved, unnoticed, the richly-dressed child strayed on, nearer, ever nearer, to the tumultuous sea. The distance rapidly

lessened. The tide came on, swift and strong, like an attacking army flushed with success.

At last—at last the girl who had been reading so long upon the solitary shore lifted her head, and let the book she had been holding drop upon her knee. What had scared her was a sound, terrible and sudden almost as the trumpet-call of an avenging angel. The noise came from the right hand, where the cliffs of the irregular horseshoe which formed the bay approached most closely to the sea. Those who have heard the tide break into St. Guthlac's Cave seldom forget the hoarse, hollow roar with which, through fissure and cranny high above, the tortured air is forced out of the grotto by the rush of hurrying water. The waves had reached it now, and hence the clamour and con-

fused medley of sound, as if of human voices crying aloud in dire extremity of terror or of pain. Already the surges were leaping up the lower courses of the rock-wall, bursting into cleft and cavern, tossing feathery spray high into the air, and swirling round in miniature whirlpools, where eddying currents encountered one another at the foot of the beetling precipice. It grew darker; rain fell in dashing sheets, and the breeze was almost a gale, the cloud-wrack rolling on overhead, the angry sea below.

For an instant or two the girl stared stupidly at the sudden turmoil of sea and storm, but then a thought occurred to her that stung her to the quick, and in a moment she was on her feet.

‘The child! the child!’ she cried, aloud, and never had her voice sounded harsh

and strange in her own ears as it now did. Breathlessly, almost incredulously, she looked around her, shading her eyes with her outspread hand because of the fierce rain that lashed her face, but she could see nothing of her charge. The little figure had wholly disappeared. In vain she peered to left and right. Nothing was visible but rock and post and sandbank, to the right the cliff bastion, honeycombed by caves, and already assailed by the sea, and to northward the rugged, rocky point that ran out to seaward. Yes, there was one indication. From where she stood she could see the print of tiny feet distinctly visible in the moist, smooth sand, and which certainly led towards the jutting headland, heavily tapestried with dark wrack-weed.

‘The child! the child!’ she exclaimed.

again, with white lips, as she darted forward. The footprints guided her to a broad and shallow pool, bordered by limpet-grown stones, and where the sea-anemone and the soldier crab and spider crab dwelt in comfort among the clefts of rock. Beyond there was a belt of small pebbles that bore no mark, but not far away the traces were again dimly visible, half effaced by the water that had oozed through the low-lying sand. Hurrying forward in breathless haste, as if to meet the fast-advancing sea, she reached the place where yet the footmarks could be seen, and with haggard eyes gazed around. But she could see nothing, nothing—nothing but the white waves rolling in, leaping hungrily around, as if intent on prey, and the tumbled rocks and weed-masses of the black headland, and the bare stretch of

sand so soon to be devoured by the sea. The child ! where, where was the child ?

The girl was not brave beyond the average of her sex and class, but now her nerves were strung to unusual tension, and she pressed on where many a stout-hearted man would have quailed. Behind lay safety ; in front was the terrible sea. On she went. Blacker and blacker grew the sky, louder the shriek of the storm-wind, hoarser the clamour of the wild waves. On she went, like some soldier in face of a battery hailing grape and shell. Courage, after all, is only a question of nerve. Some of us fight with sheer good-humoured indifference to danger, others in a sort of hysterical paroxysm of fright and rage, and others, again, because they fear the stern sergeant, the angry captain, shame and punishment, more than hostile

shot. So it was with this handmaiden. She did not dare to go back without her little charge—did not dare to say that, through her negligence, the great sea had the child in its grip; and then, too, she bitterly reproached herself for the carelessness that had brought her nursling into such sore peril; so on she pressed, regardless that every step she took carried her further and further from the firm ground and the safe, easy cliff-path, nearer and nearer to the gaping jaws of death. On she went.

The sand, intersected by watercourses where land-springs trickled from the hills, by mounds of broken rock, by pools and hollows, sloped upwards towards the rocky promontory that stretched out to sea, so that the girl found herself traversing a succession of short banks, broken here and

there by heaps of disjected stones, over some of which the waves broke already. Often she paused and looked around, shading her eyes with her outspread hand, for it was hard to see through spray and rain and the gathering blackness of the bursting storm ; but she could see nothing. Twice or thrice she called aloud. Strange-ly did her own voice sound in her bewildered ear as she raised it amidst the roar of the breakers and the scream of the wind. But nothing could be heard or seen of the lost one.

There were the tiny footsteps ever and anon as a guide, straying, wandering, devious, but always trending towards the bleak, storm-swept headland that jutted forth to sea. There, in front, was the promontory, like a great black wall, shutting out all view of the coast towards the

north—hard to be climbed by a bold and strong man; inaccessible, no doubt, to a woman or a child—and over the seaward end of this rampart the waves broke, sending up columns of sparkling spray. A giant now could not have rounded the point. But there had been a tongue of dry sand long ago visible beyond the black stones, and even the tottering steps of heedless infancy might then have achieved what now was beyond the compass of earthly strength and daring.

The footsteps lured the child's negligent attendant on, nearer and yet nearer to the perilous point over which broke the billows, exulting in their might. Scrambling over the slippery stones of the reefs that barred her way, wading recklessly through the deepening pools, and presently regaining the firm sand—wet, weary, breath-

less—she pushed on, all unaware of the mortal risk she ran, unconscious even that the path between her and security was all but blocked, and that all her speed might probably be unavailing to secure her a safe retreat to the dry land behind her. But though the water often reached her feet, and the roar of the surges grew momentarily more menacing, she followed the small footprints that led towards the headland, now washed by the furious sea, and almost hidden at times by the sheets and columns of glittering spray that broke so high above the rocky wall.

Too late ! too late now ! The time was past for safety or retreat. The swiftest runner that ever won a wreath in the Olympian Games could not now have escaped on flying feet from the triumphant sea. The tide came in like a racehorse,

and all access to the firm dry land was cut off by the swooping flood.

All unconscious of the imminence of the danger, of the doom that awaited her, the seeker pressed on. There was something touching in the girl's utter abnegation of self, or selfish fear, as, with the splashing water bathing her feet, and the shrill cry of the wild sea-mews ringing in her ears, she tracked the little footprints of her lost charge. Her hat had fallen off; her loosened hair streamed unheeded. She was knee-deep soon in the rush of frothy, bubbling whiteness, and struggled hard to make her way towards where, on a dry patch of high-lying sand-slope, the little foot-marks might yet be seen.

In came the tide like a mill-race. The water deepened rapidly, and the girl reeled, threw up her arms, and made a despair-

ing effort to scramble up the sandbank. A great wave came rolling in, white-crested, tall, curling over as it reached her in its resistless strength, and she was torn away from her foothold, and washed, helpless as a dead leaf upon a river's current, into the foamy reflux of the billow. The eddy set strongly in, once the black rocks of the jutting headland had been reached, to southward, and, amidst the swirl and ripple and tossing wavelets of the eddy, she floated away—floated away even as human institutions, creeds, and empires drift ever and always before the all-destroying stream of Time. No doubt she cried aloud, but the harsh, complaining shriek of the hovering sea-gull, the howl of the gale, and the roar of the waves drowned her feeble voice as she was swept away amidst the breakers.

CHAPTER II.

LITTLE DON.

‘NORTHWARD ho ! Hurrah ! Drink about, mates ! Here’s luck !’ bawled out a rough voice, as a rough man half rose to his sea-booted feet, and flourished aloft a tin pannikin that presumably contained some liquor more potent than those of which Good Templars approve. ‘And here’s to the captain, with three times three, and a cheer over !’

‘Hark to Lincolnshire Bill !’ echoed half-a-dozen more. ‘Captain Obadiah Jedson and his luck !’

And up went six, or more than six, mugs and tin pannikins to the lips of their respective owners; but there was no cheering, perhaps because, in deeper and more ringing tones, a powerful voice struck in—

‘ Drink my health, lads and lasses, if ye think fit, only be sober and sparing in your cups, since we have a long march before us, and work on the morrow. But drink not to luck, if you love me, as coupled with my name. How often am I to tell you that luck, as you ignorantly call it, is of another world, not this?—that it is lent as a loan, not given as a gift?—and that, if rashly boasted of or unthankfully taken, it is as the fairy gold we’ve most of us heard tell of when we were bairns in the ingle-nook, and, like fairy gold, will turn to dust and withered ivy-leaves on our

hands? Wherefore let none of this company of ours make brag or vaunt of good fortune as linked with the name of Obadiah Jedson.'

The speaker—a man of unusual, almost gigantic, height, but gaunt and lean—was standing erect beside the smoky crackling fire of thorns and wreck-wood, and thus formed the central figure of as strange a group as ever, allowing for the difference of time and climate, Salvator Rosa drew. There were sixteen or seventeen of them in all, men and women, scattered in attitudes more or less picturesque among a cluster of dry sand-hills, overgrown with reeds, rushes, and couch-grass, just above high-water mark, and a little to the northward of a headland of black, broken, weed-draped rocks that thrust itself boldly forward into the sea, quite intercepting

any prospect of the shore that lay beyond—a queer company of persons, composed as it was of men, women, and lads, in nearly equal numbers. Weather-beaten as they were, and so roughly and unconventionally attired, on account of the wild weather to which they were constantly exposed, and of the hazardous and toilsome nature of their trade, that it was hard to ascertain at a glance the age and sex of the wearer, they gathered around a sputtering fire of sea-borne wood and shrubs hastily cut for fuel, over which, by a rusty chain, on a tripod of long sticks, swung a huge black gipsy kettle, watched by a dark-haired woman on her knees, around whose sleek head a yellow handkerchief was twisted turban-wise.

And yet these strange people were not gipsies, nor smugglers, while even the least

experienced observer could scarcely have fallen into the error of confounding them with the ordinary tramps, of whom we have but too many in our English commonwealth. Every one of them had a sort of sturdy independence of bearing, such as befits those who follow an honourable and lawful calling, and none the less if it be a perilous one. At the same time there was not in their eyes the patient, bovine look with which we are so familiar in those of the rustic who mends a hedge, drives a cart, and takes his turn at plough. In some parts of England such a set of wayfarers would have been a living puzzle, liable to the gravest suspicions; but from Tweed to Humber, and from Humber to the Wash, and so far down as Lowestoft, coastguardsmen and police knew them for nothing worse than Obadiah Jedson's gang of jet-hunters.

The industry of jet-hunting is, as its name implies, very precarious. England has almost a monopoly in the world's markets of the genuine jet, that fossil which was broken off untold centuries ago from pine forests that once stood where now the North Sea rolls between our own coasts and those of Denmark. We have very little of that other fossil product of those ancient groves long submerged which is costlier than jet. Most of the amber is picked up among Danish dunes and in North German estuaries; but the jet is found on our own foreshores, and it is found irregularly as to time and season and place, some famous digging having become utterly sterile, while others, long reputed to be barren or exhausted, furnish valuable yields. 'The sand is alive!' is a not infrequent phrase on the lips of the

jet-seeker, and to him, with his intimate knowledge of the coast-line, it really does seem as if the beach on which he picks up his livelihood were a living thing. He is cognisant of its changes where a mere landsman would see no change : how cliffs crumble, how the sea encroaches here, and there falls back, how quicksands 'travel,' and the set of currents alters, and a storm may make a difference of a hundred pounds to the jet-hunters, and produce who knows what of profit for the dealers of Whitby and Scarborough.

It is not wholesome, in all respects, that life of the hunter after jet, for it has a gambling element in it, as has that of the gold-digger or the washer of diamonds. It is very possible to work for a season and go empty-handed away. It is very usual to labour for six weeks or two months with

little or no success, and then in some few days to make as much as would provide subsistence for the rest of the year, were the jet-hunter quite free from debts of some sort: which is rare. Some of the lads who toil with these companies are sent by their fathers—thrifty yeomen of the Yorkshire dales—with just doled-out coins enough to buy bread and cheese till ‘harst’ shall call them back to help on the farm; while some of the older workers exist on small advances from jewellers in the towns until a lucky find shall give them months of rest and plenty.

No gang on the Yorkshire coast was quite so famous or so prosperous as that which hailed Obadiah Jedson as its captain; and, indeed, its prosperity was largely due to his extraordinary skill, or, as was generally averred, to his remarkable good fortune.

‘He’s putting by—more and more in Bank—year after year,’ was whispered respectfully from one to another among the members of his company, to whom the idea of a jet-hunter’s saving money was something as unprecedented as the same phenomenon would have appeared amongst the reckless buccaneers of Kyd’s and Blackbeard’s time. It was seldom that these adventurers, when successful, thought of a provision for the future, or, indeed, of anything beyond the discharge of pressing debts and a few months or weeks of hard-earned idleness. Theirs was not an easy trade. They had to face all weathers without flinching, and the rather that storms, with the abrupt alterations which a tempest produces, gave them their best chance. They were constantly wet, and often hungry. To be bowed and racked

by rheumatic pains was a common end to their career. Occasionally an imprudent member of the tribe was overtaken by the rising tide, and, more frequently, the shifting quicksands of the coast took toll of their numbers. But there was a strange sort of fascination in the life, for all that—perhaps due to the hold which the possible prizes that might be gained were able to take of the imagination of these rude beings, to whom such hauls as were sometimes made appeared of dazzling value.

‘Why, whatever now!’—‘How came it here, mates?’—‘And all alone, too!’—‘Just as if it dropped frae the moon!’

The object of these comments was a tiny, a very tiny boy, richly dressed, who stood at the edge of the natural circle, or hollow, within which the jet-hunters held their wild bivouac, and gazed with great, solemn

eyes at the strange group below. Seldom, perhaps, has there been seen a more beautiful child than this, as he stood wonderingly, with his dark brown hair falling in heavy curls, and with such a face as is more often seen on a painter's canvas than in real life. Young and solitary as he was, he showed no sign of fear, but continued to gaze gravely at the strangely-attired beings gathered around the smoky fire of wreck-wood.

‘It’s just a fairy elf!’ muttered a Northumbrian, who had not shaken off the Border superstitions of his infancy.

‘More like one of the angels out of heaven!’ indignantly rejoined the woman with the yellow turban knotted round her sleek, dark hair, and who had in her hand the long iron ladle with which she had been distributing the contents of the

steaming cauldron. 'Saw ever ony one a fairer bit of a bairn thing? and what brings the pretty darling here alone, so near the cruel sea, and a storm coming on too?'

For at this moment the shrieking of the wind and the first dash of the rain, mingling with the hoarse roar of the billows, gave token of the approaching tempest.

'Peace, all!' said the captain of the gang, as he rose from his seat, and, stalking slowly to the highest part of the ridge which shut in the sand-hills from the sea, shaded his keen eyes with his broad hand, and, tossing back his mane of coal-black hair, took a long survey of the sands, and of a narrow and difficult path that led in zigzag fashion up the cliff, and which appeared, at first sight, better fitted for the tread of the wild goat or the hill-fox

than either of men or of beasts of burden. No signs of human presence could be detected anywhere. To seaward not a sail; on the cliff-top no form. Along the narrow and arduous path that led upwards, nothing was to be seen save the rank grass that waved wildly as the wind increased from a breeze to a gale. Over the extremity of the jutting headland of black, broken rocks, weed-draped and piled up steeply as a rugged rampart erected by the mighty hands of Titans, the sea was already breaking in sheets and showers of spray, while rapidly the tide ran in, and louder grew the shriek of the gale.

Nothing could be more utterly, piteously alone than the child seemed to be—alone beneath the lowering sky—alone in that desolate place, so near the hungry sea that was rushing in, driven by the storm-wind.

Yet he showed no sign of fear, as so many children of his age do when left alone. High above him stood the towering form of the captain of jet-hunters, looking down, with unusual softness in his dark eyes, at the little intruder on his bivouac. Unusually soft, too, was Obadiah Jedson's deep voice as he stretched out one of his huge bony hands, and said, gently,

‘Young master—my dear—will you come with me—away out of the rain?’

The child looked up doubtfully, and for a moment seemed about to cry. But Obadiah, gaunt and wild to look upon, had yet one of those faces that children instinctively confide in, so that after a brief pause the boy clasped his tiny white fingers around the lean brown one which the captain held out, and permitted himself to be led, unresisting, to the neighbourhood of

the fire, where all the members of the band gathered around him in a ring.

‘Belongs to gentlefolks if ever a bairn did!’—‘More like a little lord, wi’ his fine clothes, and those fearless eyes of his, like a lion’s!’

‘How came he here, though, on the sands, by himself?’ was a very general question; and the query was one which it was easier to ask than to answer. Clearly, no relative, no friend, no servant was in sight, either on shore or cliff-crest, whose presence could account for that of the solitary child. It really was as though the tiny creature—he could not have been more than four years old—had dropped from the sky upon that bleak and desolate beach. How came he here? To whom did he belong? One or two of the women, by Obadiah’s directions, had propped some frowsy scraps of tarpaulin

on poles, so as to afford the boy—delicately nurtured, no doubt—some shelter from the driving rain, as the storm increased. But the boy seemed to care little for the rain, but preferred to stand at Obadiah's side, holding the captain's bony forefinger in the grasp of his small hand, and with dauntless eyes surveyed the quaint figures around him. It was manifest that the little intruder had taken a childish fancy to this rough, grim giant of the sea-beach.

Conjecture being exhausted, it was thought best to question the child himself.

‘What is your name, little master?’ asked the tall captain, a curious sort of respect, as for the superior station of his small guest, mingling with the natural gentleness of his tone when speaking to a child.

‘Don,’ answered the boy readily, but with a grave sort of wonder, as if it were sur-

prising that a man of Obadiah Jedson's stature should be ignorant of so rudimentary a fact.

The captain looked down at the little head that seemed so far beneath him, and was puzzled.

'Do they call you nothing but Don, my dear?' he inquired, softly and patiently—'no other name, I mean, as all of us have two names—some more,' he explained.

The child shook his beautiful head, on which the brown curls glistened silken.

'Always Don,' he made answer.

'But is it a Christian name, or else a surname?' asked the woman with the yellow kerchief twisted round her sleek head. The question was too much for the tiny creature's limited experience.

'Sometimes Master Don,' he answered, half-petulantly, and with an infantine

frown. 'Nurse says that; papa never. I want to go home.'

And then he began to sob, and it was necessary to soothe and comfort him. In the meantime, there he was, and nobody, not even the captain—by common consent the shrewdest of the party—could guess how he came there, or what steps ought to be taken. That the boy was of gentle blood and nurture none could doubt. Even the exceeding delicacy of his complexion and the beauty of his little white hands told of the care that had been taken to shield him from hardship, while, on the other side, his frank, bold eyes indicated an open and courageous nature. He was handsomely, and somewhat fancifully, dressed. There were silver buttons on his tunic of green velvet, and the black belt around his waist was fastened by a massive

clasp of solid silver. The jaunty little cap was of velvet, too, and all his clothes were new and good. But it was impossible, no matter how artfully, or with what patient kindness the questions were put, to elicit from him anything that would throw a light on who he was or whence he came. The one thing clear in the boy's mind was his own identity. He was 'Don,' certainly 'Don,' and knew no other name. Papa was papa, home was home, and nurse was nurse. He seemed, with the short memory of early childhood, even to have forgotten how he came into the jet-hunters' camp, and when questioned as to the path that he had followed, pointed vaguely towards the sea, now rolling in, wave after wave. Then he seemed to be tired, and hungry perhaps; and Kezia, the woman with the yellow handkerchief tied turban-wise

around her head, and who seemed to be one of the kindest of the company, drew him underneath the rough screen of tarpaulin, and brought on a platter some of the steaming food from the gipsy cauldron, and, with some trouble, coaxed him to eat; after which he grew drowsy, and lay on the rush-covered side of the sand-hill, asleep, while a council was held to deliberate about his fate.

Many and wild were the guesses that were hazarded as to the manner in which this little waif of the Yorkshire sea-beach had come to be in the neighbourhood of the bivouac. Shipwreck was more than once suggested; but this was laughed to scorn.

‘The boy hadn’t a wet thread upon him,’ said one of the most experienced of the gang; ‘and how should one even of their

dandy pleasure-craft get wrecked on a fine morning without the coastguard sighting the job? Or how should such a lamb as that young thing come living to the land while strong men perished? No, no; there's been guilery here.'

'Guilery!' echoed the women, horrified, but with a pleasant sort of horror. 'What sort of guilery, when it's about a lad bairn like this, Measter Saunders?'

Measter Saunders, who was esteemed among the hunters of jet as an oracle second only to the captain, nodded his head as solemnly as the late Lord Thurlow, in ermine and full-bottomed wig, might have done.

'There's cheatery o' more sorts than one,' was his mysterious verdict; 'and it's not the first time babies have got smothered in Towers o' London; nor yet young innocents that stood between somebody and broad

lands and gold guineas been put out o' the way like this, comrades.'

After this oracular remark, the sleeping child was eyed, especially by the women, with even more of wondering interest and of respectful curiosity than before. But still, no progress was made towards solving the knotty point of his immediate disposal. All this time, Obadiah the captain kept silent, as if taking counsel of his pipe, while the thin blue wreaths of tobacco-smoke ascended spirally amidst the driving rain and hurrying blast. For the rough weather few or none of that rough band seemed to care. They were above high-water mark, and out of reach of the sea; and as for a summer storm, who of that seasoned company flinched from a mere wet jacket? At last Obadiah Jedson knocked out the ashes of his pipe, rose to his feet, and stretched

out his lengthy arm, with much the air and bearing of some grim, preaching corporal of Cromwell's scarlet-coated cuirassiers.

‘Lads and lasses,’ began the captain, ‘many’s the time and oft that it has been borne in upon me to chide the speaker of idle words concerning the thing that ye, in your simplicity, call luck; and mainly when, in your goodwill towards your old leader, you linked it with mention of me—of me! as if a poor, miserable, blinded worm, that is less than the least, had power to heal or to hurt, or could insure good seasons and a well-stocked cupboard. But one thing I do know: that when what you call luck, and what the Romans of old time knew by the grander name of the Diva Fortuna, knocks at the door, it bodes ill for those who linger to lift the latch and fling open the house to the guest. We will take this

child with us; he shall eat of our bread, and drink of our cup; and so, with Heaven's help, shall never the meal of meat nor the horn of ale fail us. Here is this young innocent, saved from the dread sea as a strayed lamb in winter-time from snow-wreaths and biting winds on some bleak and barren daleside; and, while Obadiah Jedson has a crust or a roof-tree, the boy shall be welcome to both. Here's my niece Kezia, that's a widow, as you know, and has had bairns of her own, and knows the ways of children, to care for the lost little one when these hands are busy with pick and shovel; and in the long winter evenings I can teach him a bit of the book-craft that helps a lad far on the up-hill road of life. So now, mates, get ready, and northward ho !'

They set forth on their northward

march, climbing, in Indian file, the steep and difficult path which ascended the cliff, with the sureness of foot which practice affords, and none the less confidently that most of them were laden with burdens more or less heavy. Obadiah, their captain, as was his wont, brought up the rear, heedfully carrying the boy in his huge arms, half sheltered from the rain by the loose jacket of coarse blue Guernsey cloth that the jet-hunter wore. Little Don was still slumbering. Once he had awakened from his sleep, but seeing Obadiah looking smilingly down upon him, he had yielded again to lassitude, and was soon trustfully unconscious whither his new and strange protector was bearing him along the storm-lashed shore.

CHAPTER III.

THE SOLDIERS' SLOUGH.

‘It sounds like “Help!” Dame Kezia,’ exclaimed the young man, whose quick ears had first caught the distant sound, and who now thrust aside his books, and started to his feet. ‘Something must have happened down dale.’

‘Let a be! let a be!’ grumbled the woman to whom he spoke, looking up from some household task in a remote corner, and turning a wholesome, wrinkled face towards the first speaker. ‘Ale in,

wit out, my deary. It is hay-harvest time now, and so many rambling lads about, besides the Irishry that come from beyond the sea, and——’

But at this juncture a shadow darkened the door, and into the house-place of the lonely dwelling—one of those houses plainly built of dry stone, of which we see so many in the north of England, and in the southern counties few or none—burst a panting runner.

‘Captain!’ cried out the breathless messenger of ill. ‘Captain—why—Mr. Don—wherever’s Captain Jedson and the rest?’

‘Not back yet from Whitby way,’ answered the woman who was called Kezia, peering at the new-comer. ‘My uncle, Captain Obadiah, sent us word by noon, in a letter, by John Anderson, the Hull carrier. There’s none here but me and

my nursling, our Don, and won't be till to-morrow.'

The young man who had been the first to hear the distant cry, and the first to speak, now came forward from where he had been seated beside the long, rough table, littered with books and manuscripts.

'Anything wrong, Joe?' he asked.

Joe, who was a lathy lad, splashed with mire and hot with speed, let his jaw drop with an expression of the most profound dismay.

'None here but thee, Mr. Don!' he said, mournfully; 'then it's all up wi' them, poor souls!—all the seven. I got free, but they are trapped, like so many mice, to smother and drown; for who is to draw them out of the Soldiers' Slough, quagged as they are, Mr. Don? and all along of Rufus Crouch being so venture-

some. Not that I'd blame him now, poor chap !'

'It was an ill day when the prospector, that red-haired Rufus Crouch, ever came in among us jet-seekers !' was Kezia's comment. 'He'd better have stuck to Australia and his gold-digging than——'

'Hush, dame !' said the young man who had been addressed as Mr. Don, and who was singularly handsome. He was perhaps a couple of years older than the bringer of the news—say, twenty years of age—with dark brown hair that curled naturally round his handsome head, with bold, bright eyes, and a face that in a woman would have been called beautiful. His figure, lithe, strong, and as well-proportioned as that of a Grecian statue, matched well with his fair, fearless face. He was simply clad, but the red shirt and the coarse blue

sailor's garb became him well. It was not uncommon among that manly race of dwellers by the sea to find comely and well-grown lads, but it was admitted that from the Tweed to the Humber, and so southwards to the Wash, Don—or 'Mr. Don,' as he was habitually called—was not as other lads, even the best and the bravest; that he was like a young prince, and that none could vie with him for daring or for grace. 'Hush, dame!' said Don, gently. 'Let Joe Nixon tell his tale.'

Joe Nixon's tale was soon told. He had been one of a party detached from the main band of jet-hunters, and influenced, if not actually commanded, by Rufus Crouch, the ex-Australian gold-digger. They had lit upon 'signs,' in the shape of fragments of buried jet, late-

ly uncovered by the effects of a strong north-wester and a troubled sea, which had made Rufus, always over-sanguine, feel confident that a rich booty was to be won before tide-rise between the Gannet Rocks and the Soldiers' Slough; so they had all ventured out, with pick and shovel, and had actually found some jet, but had been driven by the incoming sea from the Gannet Rocks, and, finally, had become 'quagged' in the dangerous quicksand that lay but an arrow-flight away, Joe Nixon alone having the power of escape, and having run as fast as lungs and limbs would allow, to summon help for the unfortunates left behind. But this was one of those cases in which it is easier to call for aid than to bring timely rescue.

'Soldiers' Slough: that means a wind-

ing-sheet drawn high, but no coffin nor Christian rites,' remarked Dame Kezia, with a shudder. 'If Uncle Obad had been here——'

'I wish he were,' interrupted Don. 'But we must do our best, though the chance is a bad one. That terrible quicksand would swallow a regiment after turn of tide. It earned its ill name long ago.'

'Deed it did!' croaked Kezia: 'when a whole picquet of dragoons, helping the mounted gaugers to chase the fair-trade folk—smugglers, they called them—got 'gulfed there, horse and man, sword and carbine; and there they lie yet, and will lie, till the Judgment. They weren't the first, bless ye, that came to their death in the Soldiers' Slough, and they won't be the last, though they gave name to the place. Joe, were Anne Shaw and

young Tom Brown among the poor creatures yonder?’

‘Yes, they were,’ curtly responded Joe; and then piteously added, ‘Mr. Don, can’t ye bear a hand to save the mates, though ’tis hard, and you and I alone?’

‘We’ll try,’ answered the young man, cheerily, as he snatched his cap and caught up a long iron-tipped fen-pole that stood propped against a rafter. ‘Come along, Joe!’

‘Don’t be hazardous, Don, my dove!’ exclaimed the woman, in some alarm. ‘It’s well to be brave, but there’s no use being over-stubborn when things go ill. What should I say to the captain if——’

‘You dear old Kezia!’ rejoined the young man, laughingly. ‘Would you make a milksop and a landsman of me of a sudden? No, no; a jet-hunter must

never call in vain with a mate at hand. I'll come back, never fear me, but not alone. At present there is no time to be lost.' And he sallied forth, with Joe at his heels.

'I should break my heart,' sobbed the woman, as she threw herself into a chair, and pressed the apron to her eyes—'yes, I should, if aught of harm befell my nursling—the bonny bairn; and for Rufus Crouch and his conceit, though jet-hunters should be true to jet-hunters in the hour of ill, and so I thought myself before the rheumatics made half a cripple of Kezia Gray.'

The dale into which Don and his followers emerged was one of the stoniest and narrowest of those valleys which cleave the coast of a portion of North Yorkshire. There was a brook, of course, that trickled

or raced, according to the rainfall, towards the sea. There were sides, more or less precipitous, and above was a table-land which in common parlance was styled the Wold; but within the dale itself opened out unexpectedly to the explorer fertile dells and lateral valleys, where farm-houses of grey stone stood among apple-trees, and where there were meadows in the deep grass of which the fat kine browsed peaceably. Just then haymaking was in full progress, and in a large field on Farmer Thorpe's land, some quarter of a mile away, many workers of both sexes were gathered. Most of these knew the young man who had been called Don. They stood, leaning on their rakes and forks, staringly, when Don burst into the midst of them, with Joe Nixon at his heels.

‘Lads,’ exclaimed the young man, eagerly, ‘I want strong arms and true hearts to go along with me on an errand of mercy. Seven poor creatures, jet-seekers like myself, are in mortal peril hard by, quagged in the Soldiers’ Slough—the terror of our shore. Joe here has got free, and brought the news. Bear a hand, Beckdale lads—help us, Yorkshiremen, whose homes are further away—help us too, Irish boys, who have come across St. George’s Channel to earn honest bread by working side by side with us in England here. Come, then, and come quickly. Captain Jedson is away at Whitby. There’s not a jet-hunter here save Joe and me. Yet help must be given to the poor souls perishing yonder in that cruel quicksand, even if we two have to go alone. For the credit of Yorkshire, for the honour of Beckdale, I

hope, lads, you'll not refuse me, when the lives of Christian men and women hang trembling by a thread.'

Then arose a turmoil of mingled voices in dispute. Farmer Thorpe himself, a notorious curmudgeon, anxious to save his fine crop of hay, as the saying is, without a shower, and quite callous to sentiment, was very much opposed to any wholesale desertion of their work on the part of his hired men. Such a breach of contract, he declared, should be punished, not only by pay withheld, but by magisterially inflicted pains and penalties. And there were some few of the elder hay-makers who more cared for their own ease than for the safety of those in peril. Luckily, however, a more generous spirit animated the bulk of those present. Forks and rakes were flung aside, and a general

move was made towards the beach, the impulsive Irish vying with the native dalesmen in enthusiasm, and loudly declaring that 'Don the jewel' was a boy out of a thousand, and that none but heathen hounds would refuse to follow so spirited a leader.

On their way shorewards, Don called a halt in front of another farm, silent and deserted now, since the hay had been stacked.

'Mr. Fletcher,' he said to the stooping, sturdy old yeoman who stood on his worn doorstep, 'you have a lot of boards about there beside your barn, and two old rick-cloths; these, if you would grant us the loan of them in saving the lives of those quagged in the Soldiers' Slough, would be worth much to us. I will be responsible for the value of any we may lose.'

‘And how if you lose yourself, lad, and don’t come back with the things or the brass?’ hesitatingly demanded the senior.

‘In that case, it is to Obadiah, your neighbour, and our captain, that you must look for payment,’ replied Don, cheerily.

‘May we have them, old friend?’

‘Ay, ay!’ grumbled the farmer; ‘but have a care, have a care, my bairn. There’ll be moist eyes in more houses than one if ye come not back.’

And, without further remonstrance, he saw planks and rick-cloths seized upon and borne away beachwards. The lower end of the dale once reached, and the sand-hills crossed, there could be seen the black, serrated line of half-sunken Gannet Rocks, around which the wavelets rippled. The tide was coming in, but there was not a breath of wind, and the sea was like a

mill-pond. Some arrow-shot or so away was a brown shining something, that looked like an ugly patch on the pure whiteness of the spreading sands, and towards the outer edge of which, nearest to the Gannet Rocks, appeared certain dark specks—human beings, clearly, and in sore need, for the Soldiers' Slough had them in its dread clutch, and they were already too deeply involved in the meshes of that fatal net to be able to extricate themselves by any exertions of their own.

‘On, on!’ cried Don, bounding forward; and at a run his followers cleared the stretch of flat beach which intervened between them and a low sand-bank, seamed with jagged rocks, at the landward edge of the famous quicksand.

‘There they are, all, as yet!’ exclaimed Joe Nixon. ‘That’s Rufus, nighest to the

Gannets, with one hand on the black stone, and those two nearer are Annie Shaw and old Peterson. But we've no time to lose, Mr. Don, for see how the Slough is alive; and that means mischief, as you know.'

And indeed the hideous surface of the slimy quicksand seemed to heave and slowly quiver, as if some sleeping monster were breathing and stirring restlessly beneath.

'Help! for pity's sake, help!' called out a shrill girlish voice, as Annie Shaw, her face white and pinched with fear, turned towards the rescuers.

The grey-haired man beside her, clinging to a pole now deeply buried in the sand, was the next to speak.

'For any sake, be quick!' he said. 'We can feel it draw us away—draw us away, as

if we were being sucked into the jaws of the grave. And it's worse, I fear, with some of those poor chaps nearer to the sea, for they're waist-deep in it, and more.'

The crowd hesitated and murmured, waiting for guidance. Then Don gave orders promptly and cheerfully, and by his directions the boards were laid down one beyond the other, so as to form a sort of floating bridge, and over this trembling pathway he himself cautiously advanced, followed at some little distance by Joe Nixon, a coil of rope in his hand.

To save Annie Shaw and grey-haired Mark Peterson was a work comparatively easy, because they were so near, and not very deeply engulfed at present. But this task performed, the two first foundlings of the lost flock being brought to land, Don braced himself for the far more arduous

duty that remained. There were yet five fellow-creatures — five comrades — to be brought in, while the tide was rising, and the heaving and shaking of the quicksand, as if the hidden monster beneath were stirring in his lair, grew momentarily more perceptible. This was indeed a service of danger; every plank had to be launched and lashed to the other planks, while along this tremulous and shifting causeway the adventurers crept on hands and knees, constantly in contact with the seething slime below. Don, like some gallant officer who heads a forlorn hope, led the way, Joe Nixon following his young leader. Then came, but at some distance, two volunteers, self-chosen from among the haymakers: one English, the other Irish — bold young fellows both, but neither would have cared to face danger

in such a shape but for Don's presence and example. The rest of the crowd remained at the edge of the firm land, now reinforced by sundry fishermen, who had taken the alarm, and had hurried down with cordage and spare spars, to be useful in case of need.

‘Have a care, Mr. Don!’—‘Take heed!’ were cries that were frequently uttered by those on the beach, to many of whom the young chief of the expedition seemed overbold. Don, however, his iron-tipped fencible in his hand, continued to advance, swiftly but cautiously. It was no trifling task. The trembling planks, often submerged, afforded but an insecure causeway that at every instant seemed in danger of being swallowed up in the tenacious mud and wet marl of the slough. The quicksand heaved and swelled, as if resentful

of the effort that was being made to rob it of its prey, and time—precious moments—had to be lost in bringing forward and launching fresh pieces of wood. The narrow gangway often seemed on the point of being sucked down into the unknown depths below, but the youthful leader of the party never quailed or hesitated for an instant, but pressed on, testing the quick-sand with his fen-pole as he proceeded. Often it seemed as if the enterprise was an impossible one, and that a little more perseverance would merely serve to add a grisly legend to the many which made the Soldiers' Slough a name of terror to the dwellers on the coast.

‘Don has got the first of them by the hand—a woman, that is. How she clings to him, poor thing! Ellen—Ellen Watson, that’s her name, of Thirsk, sister to Ralph

Watson, that's away with the jet-hunters: very respectably brought up—both,' chimed in a well-informed bystander.

'Well done, Mr. Don! and well done, Joe and Dick, and Larry from Ireland!' was the general verdict as Ellen Watson, the first of the five in peril, was pushed, dragged, helped, and hustled along the shaking pathway of reeling planks safe to shore. Then a second victim—a lad this time—was snatched from the tenacious grip of the cruel quicksand. Next it was a married man, with children at home, and whose wife stood weeping on the beach, who was helped to struggle out of the fatal clasp of the quagmire, and to regain dry land. Then another stripling was saved; and with this last act of salvage it seemed as if the good work must end, for already a thin white line of

streaky tide-foam had reached the broad shoulders of Rufus Crouch, as he held on with desperate tenacity to the black rock, encrusted with mussel-shells and cockles and sea-weed.

‘It can’t be done!’ bawled out, using his outspread hands as a speaking-trumpet, a patriarch of the beach. ‘Take an old sailor’s advice, Mr. Don, and get back to shore as quick as you can.’

‘Not alone, neighbour Threpham, not alone!’ answered Don, cheerily, but in a voice that rang like a trumpet call; and, as he spoke, for a moment he turned his noble young face, flushed with excitement, towards the crowd. They set up a cheer; they could not help it. There was not a man there who did not feel proud of their champion—of the bold, beautiful boy who was forcing his way on, in the teeth of

danger, to save a man by no means loved or lovable.

The deed was done. It was 'touch and go,' as the veteran lieutenant of the coast-guard, who had hastened down with his men, to be of use if possible, declared loudly to all who would listen. Had not Don been not merely brave, strong, and ready-witted, but one of those born leaders of men whom others follow with instinctive docility, the thing could never have been achieved; for Joe Nixon and Dick the dalesman, and Irish Larry ran imminent risk from both tide and quicksand in the arduous task of dragging Rufus Crouch—to whose rashness the whole calamity was due—from the embrace of the Soldiers' Slough. And once, when Rufus had been reached, and his great hand was grasped by that well-nerved one of Don's, it seemed

doubtful whether the rescuer would not be drawn down to perish with the unlucky jet-seeker. But the deed was done, and the fifth sufferer dragged forth from the jaws of the devouring monster of the sea-shore.

‘Hurrah for Mr. Don—our Don! Hurrah, lads!’ roared out the old fishing-skipper, Threpham, who was regarded as an oracle of the beach, and who was too large-natured to resent, as some oracles do, the non-fulfilment of his predictment of evil. ‘Heart of a lion, ay, and strength of a lion too, young as he is; to have brought seven of the poor things to shore this day against all odds! ’Tis not often that the Soldiers’ Slough has been cheated that way.’

‘Hurrah for him!’ was the universal cry, as Don, last of all, touched the firm land.

Joe, and Dick, and Larry, as minor, but approved, heroes, were already receiving their meed of praise, and hand-shakings, and pattings on the back; but an odd sort of respect seemed to hedge in Don from such familiarities, for only three of those present ventured to take his hand, and of these one was the red-faced lieutenant of the coastguard, and the other Skipper Threpham, that grey-haired Nestor of the shore. But the third was the wife of the man whom Don had saved, and she took his strong young hand, only to press it to her lips.

‘My blessing, and the blessing of my little ones, that but for you would be fatherless, be with you always, Mr. Don,’ she said, sobbing. ‘How shall we ever thank you enough, sir—I, and my man, and Annie, and Mark, and the lads, and Rufus Crouch?’

Rufus, dripping wet, but sturdily planted on his two large feet, did not look particularly grateful. He was a broad-built man of low stature, left-handed, and, as it were, left-footed too, so awkward and crab-like were his movements. His hair was red, and red too was his bushy beard, which flowed over his breast; his eyes were small, shifty, and fierce, and his face had been burned to bronze-colour by the hot sun of Australia.

‘Mates must help mates, dame; and Christians, Christians,’ lightly returned the young man who had been called Don. ‘Come, lads, let us give the farmer back his planks, and the blue-jackets their ropes, with thanks for the use of them, and there will be an end of it.’

Nobody could be less willing than Don to receive public thanks, or the noisy

expression of the popular approval. After what had occurred, the excitement was too great to allow of most of the assemblage returning to their regular work in Mr. Thorpe's hayfield or elsewhere. The public-houses were crammed, unfortunately, and much ale was quaffed in honour of Don's gallantry, and of the signal victory that had been achieved over the man-devouring quicksand. But Don himself was permitted to slip away from the clamorous throng of his admirers, to regain his abode, to say a word or two to old Kezia, to change his clothes, and then to resume his studies as if nothing remarkable had occurred to interrupt them. It was not the first time, young as he was, that his courage and adroitness had availed to preserve the lives of others. And he made light of

what he had done, as it is the practice of the brave to do, as if his prowess of that day had been a mere ordinary act of neighbourly kindness.

CHAPTER IV.

AT WOODBURN PARSONAGE.

‘GLAD to see you, Don. I am more than glad, my young friend, not only to hear your praises on all men’s lips, but to see my favourite pupil safe and sound after the risk of yesterday.’

It was not often that the Rector of Woodburn made a speech so complimentary, or, indeed, indulged in speech-making at all. He was a kind man, as well as a learned one—a specimen of those old-fashioned clergy who knew Horace at least as well as the Fathers, and to whom

culture perhaps signified more than zeal. As such, and having leisure enough, he had good-naturedly undertaken to assist young Don, the adopted child of his eccentric neighbour, old Obadiah Jedson, in his studies, and the young man was always welcome to Woodburn Parsonage whenever the roving nature of a jet-hunter's calling permitted him to pass an hour or two in the clergyman's well-stocked library. On this particular morning both Mr. and Mrs. Langton, with their orphaned charge, Miss Mowbray, were evidently waiting in the garden—a most unusual occurrence—for Don's arrival, since the open carriage, with its pair of pretty white ponies, stood ready before the ivied porch.

‘Indeed, Mr. Don, we are proud of you; and from all I hear we have reason to be proud,’ said kindly, motherly Mrs. Lang-

ton, with her beaming smile, while Miss Mowbray, who was perhaps a year younger than himself, and very pretty, timidly held out her little gloved hand to the young visitor, and said, hesitatingly, but with tears in her bright eyes,

‘We thought of you—so much—yesterday, and of your great courage, and the lives you saved from that terrible danger.’

Gently, and almost with reverence, Don took the little hand for a moment in his, while his handsome face flushed crimson.

‘You are too kind to me,’ he said, with manly modesty. ‘Any one of the fishers, any one of the dalesmen, would have done his best, I am sure, in such a case.’

Then some other words were said, and Mrs. Langton and her young charge stepped into the carriage, and were borne away at the briskest trot of the white ponies,

and, nodding a kind farewell to Don, vanished from his sight. There stood the young man, with his books under his arm, listening, or seeming to listen, to his friend and patron, the incumbent of the parish, but in truth quite unconscious of the drift of the latter's discourse. It was the first time that Violet Mowbray's tiny hand had touched his; it was the first time that he had seen those lovely eyes of hers dimmed by tears, and those tears called forth by his peril, by his daring, by the lives that he had saved from the jaws of death. Don may be excused if he was for the moment an inattentive listener to the Reverend Samuel Langton.

And now a word or two as to Woodburn Parsonage and its inmates. Truly, the rector's lines had fallen in pleasant places. His parsonage—it was always called a par-

sonage—was a roomy old house, long and low, with the trimmest of lawns, the prettiest of gardens, and the reddest of peach-walls, nestling in a wooded cleft and sheltered by protecting hills, flowers all around it, and the bright sea in front. The prospect was quite unlike the bleak one of that stony Beckdale which was shut off by a shoulder of hill, and composed a portion of the parish. Mr. Langton was fairly well-to-do in the world. He was fortunate in his wife and in his healthy, comely children. He had not too much, with the help of a curate, to do, and was tolerably well paid for doing it; while his easy temper and natural kindness of disposition had kept him on good terms with his neighbours, both with the few who went to church and the many who went to chapel. Yet Mr. Langton was not content.

The fact was that Mr. Langton had throughout his young days cherished, not unreasonably, the idea of becoming something more than Mr. Langton. He had started in life with sundry advantages, bearing, as the younger son of a famous scholar and canon, a known name, and being himself one of those rare white swans of the school-room who are industrious as well as clever. For it is a sad truth, but yet a truth, that the best brains seldom come to maturity, seldom produce good marketable results, in those earlier years by which parents and guardians are so apt to judge. The school prodigy commonly dies of water on the brain, or breaks down under the friction of the world. The pupils regarded as dullards—such as Scott or Gray—wait for manhood to write their names indelibly in the Book of Honour which records the

lives of the great. But the Reverend Samuel Langton had thought and toiled, and led a blameless life, and earned the approbation of good authorities and personages highly placed, and had justifiably dreamed of lofty preferment as almost within his grasp. He had taken high honours at the University, was the winner of all sorts of prizes, and had been second master at one of those great public schools that are as national institutions here in England, and where the honest labourer is often deemed worthy of the reward of a mitre.

In Mr. Langton's case a feeble body, frail lungs, and a lack of robustness spoiled all the fair prospects of his laborious youth. He had never the deep-toned voice, the imposing address, that make up the chief requisites of a popular preacher. And

presently he became unfit to carry on his school work. His pupils—youths of noble families in many cases, generous English lads in nearly all—who loved him well for his unfailing gentleness of temper and untiring deftness in the difficult art of teaching, were sorry to part with him, and so was his titular chief, the head master, and the authorities of the school. They were loth to part with him. They had hoped much from him, who taught so well, who could, without being an athlete, make the boys look up to him, and who would be sure to do credit to the promotion that was certain to come. But nobody could do anything for a man whose weak pulmonary organs could not, during our winter, breathe the English air—for a man whom his doctors sent to Nice, or to Cannes, or to fashionable Moritz, in the barbarous Swiss

desert of the Upper Engadine, or to Algiers, in a sudden, imperative way. He fell in love, too, and he married, and so lost his college fellowship and his prospect of a college living, and had to quit the great school, and was out of the race of life. It was very lucky for poor Mr. Langton that a man of rank and influence gave him the vacant living of Woodburn-cum-Beckdale, with its steady annual income. Everybody thought that the ex-schoolmaster would die there, since trips to Nice and Algiers are out of the reach of your ordinary parochial clergyman with a growing family. But, somehow, Mr. Langton had lived, as people do live, in spite of social predictions and proscriptions, had profited, perhaps, by the absence of worry and excitement, and was rather better in health than on the day on which he had taken leave

of his affectionate young pupil-friends.

But the Reverend Samuel Langton was not exactly a happy man. He felt that he was too good for his present position in some respects, not good enough, possibly, in others. A tender-hearted, estimable minister of religion, he could not win the hearts and convince the brains of grown men and women as he had done in the case of his boys, eager and receptive, when he taught and they hearkened. He was reckoned a good man, but a poor preacher. He was liked, but not revered.

What is a clergyman to do who finds himself the incumbent of a large, straggling, thinly-populated parish, and who has a curate to help him; a proud, sturdy set of parishioners, with hardly any real poor, any pauperised class, among them: and who is quite incapable, as a Boanerges

might have been, of preaching the strayed lambs of his ecclesiastical flock back to church? He may drop into a mere organiser of flower-shows, cricket-matches, or lawn-tennis tournaments. He may give lectures, or ride such hobbies as a big microscope or a big telescope, or drill the clodpoles of his parish into chorus-singers. He may become a confirmed non-resident, and be always dating his letters from London, Paris, or elsewhere. Or he may take to literature, or bee-keeping, or archæology and the rubbing of brasses, and rifling of barrows on commons where many a heathen hero deemed his burial-mound safe for ever. Mr. Langton had tried to take to literature. But there are two sides to that bargain, and literature would not take to Mr. Langton. The renowned periodicals to which he sent his contributions, with little

hope of pecuniary reward, but glad if his name should remind old rivals, friends, and pupils that he yet lived and thought, respectfully declined them. He saw his inferiors, intellectually speaking, promoted to deaneries and bishoprics. There he dwelt, on the quiet Yorkshire coast, and was glad to have so bright a boy to teach as bold, beautiful Don was.

And now for the brief history of Violet Mowbray. The girl was an orphan, as has been said. Her father, Major Mowbray, had died in India, and within a few months his wife, quite young, had followed him to the grave. Violet—who, like most delicate, and indeed European, children, had been sent early to Europe to escape the sultry heats and rainy seasons of the Madras Presidency—had been left fatherless and motherless at an early age. She

was eighteen now, and within a month or two of her nineteenth birthday, and of the small income—it was but four hundred a year—that she had become heiress to so sadly soon. A considerable part had been allowed to accumulate, at compound interest; so that, as her guardian was wont to declare, the girl was, for a young lady, almost rich.

Violet's guardian was, in his way, a character—a fine example of the old-world second or third-rate sort of British merchant, of whom there were so many in the last century, and are so few in this. Mr. Marsh lived—actually lived, and gloried in living—over his place of business in Dagger Court, City, where he inhabited a set of grand old rooms, with carved woodwork and painted ceilings. He was himself a gruff, upright, sour-spoken old

bachelor, just the sort of man who ought to have worn a brown coat, and a scratch wig, and square-toed shoes, and deserved to be born when Cowper was a school-boy and Mr. John Gilpin a living citizen. Why Major Mowbray selected him as executor of his will and trustee of his daughter's fortune is uncertain. The Mowbrays were what are called well-connected people, and there were Lord Georges and Lord Fredericks under whose care the orphan might have been placed. However, the quaint, gruff Ephraim Marsh proved himself well worthy of his trust. He could not take the little girl home to his own queer eighteenth century dwelling, where he was waited on by an austere couple of servitors, a certain Mr. and Mrs. Juniper, butler and housekeeper, of whom he was secretly afraid, and who had been in his

father's service before they passed, as of right, into his. But he sent her to a good school, and presently contrived to find a temporary home for her under the roof of his niece, Mrs. Langton.

It would never have done for so fair a flower as Violet Mowbray to have been transplanted from school to such an abiding-place as Dagger Court, E.C., and to have no female companionship but that of severe old Sarah Juniper, never known to smile or to pocket a sixpence not strictly belonging to her. As for Mr. Marsh himself, he was one of those who seem to atone for sterling excellence by a disagreeable manner and a forbidding look. He belonged to an angling club, and in summer spent his holiday afternoons in capturing gudgeon, hooking roach, and growling at the steam-launches that in

carelessness or malice half capsized his peaceful punt with their wash and splash, somewhere about Thames Ditton. He belonged to a chess club, and in winter passed his evenings in tough, slow contests with veteran opponents. It was only on Sundays that he dined in Dagger Court. His beautiful, dainty young ward would have pined and died in an atmosphere so uncongenial. Luckily for her, Mr. Marsh had remembered his niece, the wife of the Yorkshire clergyman, and luckily, too, there was room for her in the comfortable parsonage, while the two hundred a year that she brought along with her—half her income—was serviceable in eking out the ways and means of the rector's family.

It has been said that Violet was very, very pretty. So she was; but there are

styles, as well as degrees, of prettiness. She was not tall. She had a most delicate complexion, in which the colour came and went, almost too sensitively ; a white, oval forehead, sunny hair, and large grey eyes, fringed by dark lashes, so long and full as to touch the peach-like cheek when those beautiful eyes were downcast. There had been doubts at first, as often happens with children Indian-born, as to whether she would survive to womanhood ; but she had gained health and strength during the years she had spent at Woodburn, and was well and active now.

That Don should have admired her, seeing her often, as he necessarily did—since he was a frequent and welcome guest at the parsonage, where Mr. Langton esteemed the young jet-seeker as the best and quickest pupil that he had ever helped

along the rugged road to learning—is perhaps not wonderful.

See him—Don—now, as he slowly walks away, his books under his arm, down the winding road that leads to the shore, the lesson of the day over. He is thinking much less of Mr. Langton and his kindness—although it is in his nature to be grateful—than of the witchery of those grey eyes that belong to Violet Mowbray, of the touch of that little hand, the very sense of contact with which had sent the blood coursing and thrilling through his veins. These young people had often met, but very slight had been the actual intercourse between them. The inequality of their condition forbade all familiarity. Don, though a bright, gallant lad, beloved by all, was a mere jet-hunter—a foundling—a nobody. Miss Mowbray, though not

rich, was a lady born, able to count kin, had her inclinations been genealogical, with more than one noble family, and between her and the waif of the sea-shore there seemed to exist a social gulf, impassable. Youth is proverbially hopeful; but even in Don's eyes the difference of rank seemed one too great to be surmounted.

‘I have loved her since I knew what love meant:’ such were his muttered words, as he descended the winding road; ‘but I know that she is far out of my reach as are the stars that shine down upon me. What am I? Only a jet-seeker: only the adopted son of a kindly, eccentric old man. Perhaps, if the mystery that hangs over my birth were but cleared up—but no! I must be patient, and hide my heart's dearest wishes, even from her,

under a cold bearing. It would be base indeed to presume on Mr. Langton's simple kindness.'

CHAPTER V.

GOLDEN TIDINGS.

AMONGST the many grand houses—or ‘palatial mansions,’ as the fashionable house-agents in their ornate catalogues love to style them—which have the advantage of overlooking Hyde Park, that of Sir Robert Shirley was by no means the least splendid or spacious. There are baronets and baronets, no doubt. This was a long-descended wearer of such hereditary honours as accrue to the Red Hand of Ulster. Shirley is an ancient name,

and those who bore it had always been estated gentlemen of high degree. It was Sir Harry who, after fighting on the Royalist side at Naseby and Worcester, cut down his oaks, melted down his Tudor plate, and sent five thousand gold broad pieces to His Sacred Majesty at his out-at-elbows court of Bruges, or Breda. The merry monarch, after the Restoration, had never found it convenient to repay the advance; but he had rewarded his loyal subject by affably winning some more of his money at gleek, or shovelboard, or basset, in Whitehall Palace, and by creating him a baronet. The two last owners of Shirley Park had, like their successor, borne the name of Sir Robert more often than not clipped into 'Bob' by their intimates on the race-course and in the hunting-field. The present baronet

bore the nickname of 'Robert the Third.'

Sir Robert Shirley was in what was officially known as his study. Now, even as baronets vary, so do studies, especially in a London house, from the cramped little den, choked with books and littered with papers, to the stately library, with its long tables and well-stocked shelves and array of lamps, and probably space and accommodation for busy secretaries and erudite custodians. But Sir Robert's study could be classed in neither of these two categories. In the first place, it was not furnished as befits a study. One cannot study without books, nor can a man commit his thoughts to paper without the concomitant aids of pen and ink; whereas, in the Shirley town library there were no books—at least, none worth

mentioning. As works of reference, there were the Stud Book, the Racing Calendar, and a few volumes, bound in crimson, of a sporting magazine. There was a red velvet divan, well-cushioned, and also lounging-chairs of red velvet, and little tables on which lay cigar-boxes and sporting periodicals, and *consoles* on which stood dainty little statuettes in alabaster or marble, and bronze horses from Milan, with Turkish pipes and jewelled arms of oriental make, and all the costly toys with which the rich surround themselves. There were pictures upon the walls, small cabinet paintings gorgeously framed, and which, if authentic, were very valuable.

Sir Robert was alone. A handsome man enough, so far as form and features went, with no reference to expression; tall, slender, and of goodly presence. He

was neither old or young—thirty-three, perhaps, or some two or three years older—with a pale, resolute face, that was almost waxen in its pallor, hair as black as the raven's wing, very dark eyes, and very white teeth. But perhaps the most prominent feature, if it may be so called, of the baronet's face was the long black moustache, carefully trimmed and trained, gummed and pointed, and the arrangement of which often caused the lord of Shirley to be mistaken by strangers for a foreigner. His was indeed a countenance rather Italian than English, eminently aristocratic withal, but one that would well have suited with the character and the deeds of some subtle contemporary of Borgia and Macchiavelli—one of those white-handed patricians who plotted, and lied, and stabbed, and poisoned smilingly.

It was a fact that nobody ever had really loved, nobody had ever really liked, Sir Robert Shirley. An unpopular boy at Eton, an unpopular officer in the Lancer regiment to which he had formerly belonged, he was now disliked in his club, or clubs, and tolerated only because the outer crust of his worldly respectability, if chipped, had never sustained serious damage. If the old school-fellows and ex-brother-officers of the master of Shirley had been cross-examined as to the grounds of their antipathy to one who apparently had much to recommend him, they would probably have been puzzled to allege anything positive. 'A sly, close fellow—still waters that run deep, for no good,' might have been the verdict both of Etonians and cavalry subalterns. It was the same in the bigger world of London.

Few of those who habitually met Sir Robert knew precisely why he was little liked, and less trusted by them. It may have been that he was supremely selfish, cynical in manner, and careless of the goodwill of others; certainly it was not that he had ever done anything which should exclude him from the society of gentlemen, so far as was known. There had been flying rumours, disparaging tattle, to the effect that Shirley was more hawk than pigeon, that he had won cash and acceptances from drunken lads at uncanny hours in the morning, had run his race-horses or scratched their names with a single-minded idea of profit that displeased the august magnates of the Jockey Club; and that the gilded youths who frequented his society were certain sooner or later to be the poorer for his

mentorship. But then, so many ill-natured things are often said concerning a sporting gentleman with narrowed means and a mortgaged estate.

Sir Robert Shirley could not afford to live at Shirley Park, the majestic old manor at which Queen Bess herself had in her time been a guest. But he had a hunting-box hard by Market Harborough, and a tiny villa near Newmarket, and he kept up the London mansion pretty well. Wages may have been in arrear sometimes, and bills unpaid, but there were liveried servitors, and carriages and horses, and bachelor dinner-parties for all that, while ever and anon there would set in a halcyon period, a sort of financial flood-tide, when ready money would abound, and even long-suffering London tradesmen derive benefit from the tem-


porary prosperity of their titled customer.

‘A person, Sir Robert, wishes very much, if you please, to see you for a minute. From abroad, I believe,’ said the discreet butler, who had entered quietly, as a butler should do. ‘The man is very pertinacious, and won’t go away.’

‘Tell him to write, then,’ returned the baronet, arching his eyebrows, as he looked up from behind the newspaper in his hand: ‘or call the police. One can’t afford in London to be open to all comers, Binns, as you ought to know.’

Binns the butler coughed apologetically under his employer’s rebuke. It cannot be reckoned among the faults of town-bred servants, especially in grand houses, that they are over-ready to usher in unknown applicants.

‘I should not have thought of such a



thing, Sir Robert,' he said, mildly, 'only that the party insisted that his name was well known—name of Crouch, please, Sir Robert, and——'

'I do remember such a name. Show him in,' said the baronet, with a frown.

The visitor was promptly inducted into the room. A broad, short man, roughly dressed, in spite of the heat of the weather, in a coarse pea-coat, such as North Sea pilots wear, and with heavy boots besmeared by what was certainly not the mud of London streets—a man with a shaggy red beard that fell upon his breast, with a head of unkempt red hair, and with little restless eyes, like those of a wild boar at bay. Not a nice-looking, frank-spoken, honest-faced sort of man, by any means. A smooth exterior, a polished manner can be dispensed with where there

is sterling metal beneath the rugged surface; but this man was almost ostentatiously repulsive of aspect. His was a mien easy to associate with the shafts and rubbish-heaps, the tents and bivouac fires, of a gold-diggers' 'rush' under the Austral sky. Easier still, perhaps, to link him with a vision of fallen gum-trees, a barricade of logs across the dusty road, and the gleaming gun-barrels and ragged felt hats of bush-rangers, rising from their ambush to plunder the caravan of successful gold-seekers—not a pleasant-looking man.

Sir Robert Shirley, leaning against the corner of the massive, marble chimney-piece, his sporting newspaper still in his hand, might have posed for an ideal portrait of aristocratic disdain as he lounged thus, in a graceful but unstudied attitude,

his sleepy, dark eyes but half unclosed, as he languidly turned his handsome white face towards the importunate visitor.

‘You—wished to speak to me—Mr. ——’ he said, slowly.

‘Crouch, Rufus Crouch,’ coolly returned the new-comer, as, uninvited, he selected an easy-chair, and seated himself. ‘No new name to you, Sir R., now, is it? But we may as well make ourselves comfortable before we begin our chat, mayn’t we?’ And, as he spoke, he threw himself back in the softly-padded chair, and set down his battered hat among the gewgaws on the pretty little table within reach. ‘We were pals once: thick as thieves, as the saying is, hey, Sir R.?’

The face of Sir Robert Shirley, as, with haughty surprise, he looked down upon this extraordinary visitor, would

have made the fortune of the painter who should have succeeded in transferring it to the canvas. The sleepy eyes were now open, and there was fire in their regard, while the pencilled brows contracted frowningly, and the well-cut lips tightened beneath the shade of the black moustache. So might Cæsar Borgia have looked at a vulgar tool of his who presumed to be insolent. But in our prosaic nineteenth century, and in this England of ours, neither the poisoned wine-cup nor the daggers of eager satellites lurking within call are immediately available to get rid of inconvenient intruders. Wherefore the master of Shirley, with considerable self-control, assumed a smiling aspect, and, after a moment's hesitation, sat down almost opposite to Rufus Crouch, who, from the

vantage-ground of his easy-chair, and perhaps divining the drift of his thoughts, eyed him with malicious eyes.

‘Well, Crouch, back again, I see. Why, I thought you fairly settled, under another name perhaps, in Australia,’ said the baronet, assuming a tone of genuine good-nature, and playing his part very well.

‘’Tain’t all of us, Sir R.,’ replied the man, provokingly, ‘that have the luck to be baronets, or to have the dirty acres entailed upon us, is it now, Sir R.? I know, and *you* know, how one chap may get hanged for peeping over the hedge, and another may steal the horse without a question asked; hey, Sir R.?’

The words were offensive, and the manner in which they were uttered was more offensive still. Sir Robert Shirley was a proud man, apt to resent a liberty on

the part of his social inferiors; but he merely laughed now.

‘Always the same sour sort of chap, Rufus, eh?’ he said, half-playfully; ‘a crab-apple, as we said in the west country—as when you carried my second gun in the battues at Shirley. How did Australia use you?’

‘Much as Australia—and England, too, for that matter—uses them that haven’t been born with a silver spoon in their mouths, Sir R.,’ rejoined the fellow, with great asperity. ‘If I got gold, I spent gold; and a dog’s life, as a digger, I had of it, working, ay, working as navvies never did in a railway cutting; starve to-day, feast to-morrow. Not but what I learned a thing or two as to the lie of the gold and prospecting.’

And here the man looked thoughtful,

and there was a dash of vanity in his tone.

‘Yes,’ he added, after a pause; ‘yes, the stuff’s nigh everywhere—even here in England, only you trample over it, and are blind to it. But the days are done now for your independent digger t’other side of the world. No more nuggeting; no more cradle-rocking. Nothing but big companies, machinery, wages, and quartz-crushing, while the beef and the dampers are as dear as ever, and the rum and the brandy as murderous. It’s a master’s country now, not a poor man’s, is Topsy-turvyland.’

‘And the bush?’ asked the baronet, lightly.

‘What do you mean by the bush?’ growled Rufus, scowling at him as fiercely as a tiger-cat about to spring.

‘Nothing, nothing; don’t lose your

temper,' rejoined Sir Robert, equably. 'And now, Crouch, what can I do for you? Any recommendations, any interest that I can exert on your behalf, if, as I conjecture, you are in quest of employment here at home, I would willingly concede for the sake of old days, and on account of your father, who was bailiff and right-hand man at Shirley, as I can well remember, in my father's time. One thing I warn you of—ready money is as scarce with me as leaves on a birch at Christmas, so that I can be of little use in that way; but——'

'You may spare your trouble and your smooth words, Sir R.,' said Rufus, very gruffly, but earnestly. 'I could be a quill-driver again, as I was before, I daresay, without asking you to make or meddle. But just now it is Fortune herself, though

you may not think it to look at me, that
knocks at your door, for, Sir Robert
Shirley, Baronet, I come here as the
messenger of golden tidings.'

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRUST-DEED.

SIR ROBERT SHIRLEY, reluctantly seated opposite to his plebeian visitor, himself well-dressed, fastidious, and eyeing the intruder with haughty surprise and disgust but thinly veiled, presented a striking contrast to the ruffian with whom he conversed. That Sir Robert was not a good man might easily be guessed. But there was something of grace and elegance to environ him, something thoroughbred about him, villain as he might very

possibly be. Whereas Rufus Crouch, on this occasion of set purpose, showing the more salient points of his unamiable character, appeared a scoundrel, unredeemed by one touch of gentleness or trait of excellence. Each of these two men, so widely divided by rank and worldly circumstances, had known a great deal about the other; Rufus's reminiscences being, of course, the more ample, since it is better worth the while of a land-bailiff's son to drink in gossip as to the heir to his master's title and estates, than for the future baronet to remember idle tattle as to the shrewd son of a useful subordinate. Probably each thought that he had taken the measure of the other, and probably both were wrong. The baronet was the first to speak.

‘Golden tidings, Mr. Crouch,’ said Sir

Robert mildly, 'would of themselves ensure a welcome anywhere. I am not—as I may tell you in confidence—a wealthy man, and such intelligence would be doubly dear to me. You know that my grandfather left the estates in a bothered condition, and my poor father, and I myself, I daresay, have added to the burdens rather than lightened them, I fear. Well, Rufus, let me hear your good news. In what Australian goldmine, now languishing for lack of capital, ought I to take shares, with the certainty of three hundred per cent. annual profits? or what buried treasure, in some stony gully beneath the constellation of the Southern Cross, can be had for the expenditure of a few cool hundreds? and——'

'Now, Sir R.,' broke in Rufus, impatiently, and slapping the table beside him with his heavy hand, after a fashion that made the

dainty objects it supported leap or quiver, 'I didn't come here to be made game of, nor yet mocked. I know your bantering way of old. No; I'm no tout for a joint-stock concern in a bad way, nor am I one of the drivellers who maunder about horse-loads of the yellow dust and flakes, stowed away in far-off places of the bush, as some do. To my thinking, the old country is the richest. I never saw a rush or a placer to equal some of the snug, quiet ways of money-making of which there are so many in England, and——'

He seemed to pause for breath, and Sir Robert blandly remarked, 'I quite agree with you, Crouch. Colonial enterprise opens out, no doubt, fresh fields for the adventurous, but the home market is perhaps the safest. You learned a good deal, I am sure, while you occupied the honour-

able, if humble, position of confidential clerk to the late Mr. Bowman—Lawyer Bowman, as we generally called him in Somersetshire—before your worthy employer had the sad loss of memory and physical strength which succeeded to the paralytic stroke, and before you——’

‘Cut away with his cash-box,’ interjected Rufus, glaring at his entertainer; ‘that’s about what your civil chat comes to, Sir R. Shirley, Baronet. Yes, I bolted. And not only did I carry with me the ready coin and notes—little enough, I promise you, and which melted like snow in the sun—that the miserly old hunks kept by him, but every valuable paper that his big iron safe contained, some of them dating from before the time that I first was indentured to him as his articled clerk. I made a clean sweep. Settlements, wills, mortgage

deeds—all were fish that came to my net just before my start for Topsyturvyland. I landed in Australia with precious little money, but with a heavy heap of parchments, I can tell you, Sir R.'

'Let me hope, for your sake, that the parchments proved precious too,' said Sir Robert affably, but arching his eyebrows once more. 'Of the morality of the transaction that preceded your—departure from your native land, I prefer to say nothing. It was irregular, of course. It might have caused inconvenience to yourself, on account of the inveterate prejudices of the public at large, and of the peculiar view of judges, magistrates, and other legal functionaries with respect to the erratic freaks of genius. I give no opinion; it is no concern of mine. I am not the Public Prosecutor, nor can I be numbered among the

law officers of the Crown, and therefore——’

‘Ay; and, Sir R., those that live in glass houses can’t afford to fling stones,’ coarsely retorted Rufus. ‘We don’t care to set our neighbour’s rick on fire, for fear of our own kindling up, do we, Sir R.?’

Sir Robert Shirley’s pale face may have become a shade the paler, and he winced a very little, as a daintily-groomed horse winces under a stinging stroke of the whip. But he managed to smile as he made answer,

‘You were always a philosopher, Crouch, in your cynical way. Most men have their foibles, I am afraid, and few of us, in the Palace of Truth, would come off scatheless and unrebuked. What I regret is that you should deem it necessary to assume a hostile tone towards one who has always wished you well. It is not as if our

interests were at variance; I don't say that in the least.'

'No bones broke and no offence taken, Sir R. Shirley, Baronet,' grumbled out Rufus, as his restless eyes scanned the white, handsome face of his former acquaintance, 'so long as you recollect the job we both had a hand in.'

'I should prefer to say, the service you once rendered me,' chimed in Sir Robert, with genial cordiality.

'The job of which I have the proofs,' went on the inexorable Rufus. 'I don't want to be always throwing it in your teeth, Sir R.; only, when one's got a pistol handy, one has got a pistol. Suppose that business brought to light, and sifted in a court of justice, and reported in the papers, and so forth, how tongues *would* wag at the Pall Mall Clubs, wouldn't they, Sir R.? It

would be, "Who'd have thought it?" from some, and "I always knew he'd been up to games of some such sort," from those that prided themselves on being knowing ones, and a sad disgrace it would be too, wouldn't it, Sir R.? A rough chap like myself wouldn't suffer half so much in oakum-picking, or on the crank, or quarrying stone at Portland or Princetown, as a white-fisted gentleman like yourself, Sir R., used to the best of everything.'

'Confound you! don't try me too much,' broke out the baronet, passionately, as a faint tinge of angry crimson rose to his brow, and his dark eyes glanced, perhaps mechanically, towards a bijou cabinet, behind the locked doors of which, as he well knew, a loaded revolver lay for purposes of self-defence. But in a moment more he laughed with apparent frankness. 'All this

time you have forgotten to explain to me, Crouch, the nature of your golden tidings,' said the baronet, with no sign of ill-temper. 'I could only gather that they are in some way connected with the documents which you—conveyed, we will call it—to Australia with you. And, if so, I am at a loss to conjecture in what manner their contents could possibly affect me. Old Mr. Bowman had ceased to be my father's country solicitor full two years before your hasty journey to the Antipodes, and I am pretty sure that the Shirley deed-boxes, with their musty freight of mortgage deeds and leases in counterpart, had long before your departure been transferred to lurking-places in another office.'

'Now, Sir R.,' said the ex-gold-digger, grimly, 'you must take me for a new

chum, indeed, as we say in Australia, if you think I would have burdened myself with such rubbish as that. No, no; I had other fish to fry. Far off in the bush, when others slept, I've sat up, many's the night, in my tent, poring by the flickering light of a stump of candle over the papers and parchments I had with me. Most of them were useless, only fit to be cut into tailors' measures, but some were better worth, and one in particular. You ain't married, Sir R.?' abruptly, and as if a sudden thought had struck him, demanded the man, and there was something of dismay in his tone.

'I thank you for the kind consideration which, I am sure, prompts your inquiry,' rejoined Sir Robert, gravely. 'No, I have not the happiness to be married.'

'That's right!' emphatically exclaimed

the returned adventurer, with another sounding slap of his heavy hand on the unoffending table. 'For in that case, Sir R., I should have had to go further afield in search of a partner, and that would have been a pity, wouldn't it, since you and I understand each other, don't we? Well, Sir R., since you are single still, you're my man, if you please. And you ought to be much obliged to me, too, for it is one word for me and two for yourself: what with the fine fortune, and what with the charming young wife.'

It was a genuine look of surprise which came into Sir Robert Shirley's face, and for a moment he seemed in doubt as to whether he were not conversing with a lunatic. He shrugged up his shoulders, as a Frenchman would have done.

‘Excuse my astonishment, Crouch,’ he said, incredulously ; ‘I never contemplated you until this instant in the somewhat novel character of a match-maker. Hitherto I have kept clear of the rose-bowers and raptures of matrimony ; why, I hardly know. Perhaps I was fastidious in my choice. Perhaps there would have been a hitch as to settlements, for Shirley, as you are perhaps aware, my friend, is dipped beyond redemption in the black quagmire of debt.’

‘I can get you out of debt, Sir R., indeed I can,’ said the rough visitor, earnestly. ‘I can set you free from duns, and make your life easy to you—for your life, at least.’

‘I should be satisfied with that. Your power to aid, friend Crouch, does not, I

opine, reach beyond the grave,' said Sir Robert, languidly. 'What I want you to do is to come to the point.'

'I'm coming to it, Sir R.,' was the man's sullen answer. 'Now, you must know, I get my bread as a jet-hunter on the Yorkshire coast, Whitby way. A nice business it is! Why, only last week I was all but drowned, buried alive, along with others of the gang, in a quicksand. I'd not have been here to-day, Sir R., but for a young jackanapes.'

'You were very much obliged to the jackanapes, no doubt,' said the baronet, showing his white teeth.

'I hate the curly-haired, dandy chap, with his gentleman airs, as I hate poison!' growled Rufus; 'but that's neither here nor there. I only spoke to say what a calling it is for a man who has seen better

days. Well, Sir R., our captain, as we jet-hunters call him, has a house in Beckdale, parish of Woodburn, near Daneborough, and that part of the coast, being rich in jet, and as well-known to old Obadiah as his farmyard is to any farmer, has come to be in a sense our headquarters. Now—you see I am open with you, Sir R.—in Woodburn parish, ay, and in Woodburn Parsonage, lives the young lady whom I should like to see as Lady Shirley.'

'Indeed! may I ask her name?' demanded Sir Robert.

'Her name, Sir R.,' returned the man, grudgingly, but with emphasis, 'is Violet—Violet by name, I should say, and by nature, for she is a timid, pretty young lady, nineteen years of age, and knows nothing of the world's ways, and just as little

of the fact that she's a great heiress.'

'Upon my word,' said the baronet, coolly, 'you have traced a very charming portrait of rural loveliness and simplicity. What is the name of this wood-nymph?—Nereid, rather, as a dweller on the solitary sea-coast—and what the amount of the fortune which she has unconsciously the power to bestow?'

'The fortune,' replied Rufus, slowly, and fixing his small keen eyes upon the white impassive face of his aristocratic host, 'was at the first seventy thousand pounds. It must be a goodish bit more by this, rolling up as it has been for years. Think, Sir R., what such a heap of ready cash would be to you.'

There came a flash into Sir Robert's sleepy dark eyes, and his whole countenance seemed to brighten.

‘Sure of the sum-total, Crouch?’ he asked, eagerly.

The fellow nodded.

‘Now for her surname, then?’ inquired the baronet—‘though if she were Snooks or Sniggs I could condone it, double-gilded as it would be by such a dower—if only there’s no mistake as to the money.’

‘No, Sir R.,’ interrupted the ex-gold-digger, gruffly. ‘And there’s just as little mistake as to the young lady that owns it. Miss Violet Mowbray is her name, and from all I hear the Mowbrays are as good as even the Shirleys, so far as pedigree goes. This young girl is an orphan. Her father was an officer that died in India. Her mother died there too. She has a small income, and her guardian, a tough old City bachelor, arranged for her to reside with his own niece, our parson’s wife,

Mrs. Langton. She has grown up in that quiet nook, and knows no more of the thumping sum she is entitled to than I do whether it will freeze or thaw next Christmas.'

'How do you know of it, Rufus?' asked the baronet. 'Some will, eh, that formed part of your spoil on leaving your former employers?'

'Not a will,' answered Crouch, with a wink. 'Wills may be revoked and codicils added; but this is a snugger sort of thing. This is a trust-deed. But that is about all I have to tell gratis, Sir R. Shirley, Baronet.'

And, indeed, nothing more by the most skilful diplomacy could be extracted from Rufus. He certainly had not brought the valuable document with him, nor would he give any further information as to its

contents until a bargain had been struck, and his own recompense or share agreed to. Nor would he, on that occasion, name his price—that was a matter for future consideration. What he desired to know was whether Sir Robert would ‘come into it’ heart and soul, and take immediate steps to bring the scheme to a successful conclusion. Sir Robert was ready enough to lend his aid, but he demurred to taking what he called ‘a leap in the dark.’

‘I don’t ask you to marry, Sir R.,’ said the former confidential clerk of Lawyer Bowman, at last, ‘without better security than my bare word that the bride’s little hand is weighted with much gold. But then, suppose she shouldn’t fancy you? Or suppose something should happen? We all know the proverb about the cup

and the lip. My interest and yours, though, go in the same groove. And what I advise is, come down to Yorkshire and judge for yourself.'

'Perhaps it would be better so,' returned the baronet, slowly; 'though to leave London in the full season is a sacrifice, of course. When first you spoke of Daneborough, Woodburn, and so forth, I recollected a dreary old place of my father's in those parts that I haven't seen since I was a boy, and never thought to see again—Helston, they call it. The house has been shut up for years, but it belongs to me after all, and it lies, I remember, just about the upper end of Beckdale, and four miles from the sea. I might go down there, if this prize of yours be really worth the winning.'

'You never did a wiser thing in your

life, Sir R., rely on it, than following up the golden clue that I have put into your hands,' said Rufus Crouch, picking up his hat and rising from his seat. 'So good-bye for the present, Sir R. Shirley, Baronet. Our next talk, with your leave, had better be in Yorkshire. No need to write to me. News flies fast in a country-side, and when you come to Helston I'm certain to hear of it. Meanwhile, your humble servant.'

And, with no more formal leave-taking, the ill-assorted confederates parted.

CHAPTER VII.

THE JET-HUNTERS.

‘STRIKE work!’ shouted a powerful voice. ‘Gold is better than silver, and light than dark, and Gospel truth than vain imaginings. Down with shovel and bar and pick; down with spade and basket, lads and lasses, and give thanks, old and young, for the plenteous harvest of this day. For a harvest it is, full measure and heaped up, and ready to be garnered, that lies ready to your hand.’

It was Obadiah Jedson who spoke, and

a picturesque figure did the aged captain of jet-hunters present, as he suddenly appeared standing on a flat-topped rock, the highest of a rugged reef of storm-beaten stones, at the foot of which some fifteen members of his company were busy at their usual toil on the sea-beach. Years had not bowed the gigantic figure of Obadiah Jedson, and the long, thin, grey locks that streamed from under his broad-brimmed hat only served to add to the impressiveness of his aspect. There he stood, in his coarse, working garb, towering aloft, and bearing himself with a dignity that was perhaps not wholly un-studied. Beside him stood Don. It was a bright June morning, and the hour so early a one that the glorious summer sunrise was not as yet an accomplished fact, and the golden rays yet flecked and

kissed with tremulous light the dancing azure of the sea. Inland the green corn waved in billowy masses before the gentle breeze, and the lark soared high above the rising downs, straining its little throat as it poured forth its world-old carol of hope and joy. There were streaks of lilac and rose-pink that clung to hazy cloud-threads in the dappled sky. The jet-seekers, some straggling, others collected in a group, with upturned faces, looked towards their captain, as if waiting to hear more.

Time had confirmed, instead of lessened the influence of Captain Jedson over those who co-operated with him in his strange industry. The average muster-roll of the jet-hunters' company may have been shorter than of old, but that was because new openings and fresh careers allured away the recruits who would once

have thrown in their lot with the explorers of the sea-shore. Jet, like other commodities, fluctuates in its market price on account of the caprices of fashion. Sometimes, in the years which had followed that memorable day on which the foundling of gentle birth, who was still known as Don, and Don alone, had been met with on the lone sea-beach, the value of jet had sunk so low that few except Captain Obadiah's company, sorely shrunken in numbers, went on pursuing so unprofitable a trade. Then there came, perhaps from abroad, a sudden and imperative demand that far exceeded all possible sources of supply. Jet was wanted for everything, from a shoe-buckle to a rosary-bead. The dresses of Parisian great ladies were incomplete unless trimmed with sprays and festoons of jet, while brooches, crosses, fans, and

bracelets had to be manufactured in hot haste, as fast as English dealers could export the raw material. These, of course, were palmy days for the veterans of the coast.

It was not merely because Obadiah Jedson knew his trade, nor was it only because he was an upright man, as to whose integrity even Rufus Crouch, one of the newest, and certainly the most cantankerous of the company, would not have dared to cavil, that the gaunt old chieftain was revered. There had grown up a legend, which was more or less implicitly believed in by those who followed him, to the effect that Captain Obadiah's long good fortune was due to supernatural aid. It was not merely that he had never been driven, like others, to abandon his career under the sharp pinch

of poverty, and was reputed to have actually saved money ; but then, his escapes from mortal peril had been so frequent, and his prudence had availed to save so many times the lives of those under his orders, that the captain was less honoured for the prizes he had won than for the dangers he had eluded. It is a hard business, that of the jet-hunter.

Perhaps one reason for Obadiah's remarkable personal influence over others was that, often and weightily as he spoke, he was a reticent man, who would brook neither jest nor questioning. That he had once been a teacher in a school, and, subsequently, an engineer in a great silver-mine in South America, was known. He was, therefore, superior in education and experience to those whom he led, but not so superior as to be cut off by

a gulf of taste rather than knowledge from the untutored beings around him. That he was a religious man, as well as an honest one, none could doubt. He would sit for hours under the lee of a rock, turning the pages of the little Bible that was his constant companion, and sometimes he said a word or two in public that made more impression on the hearers than most sermons did, but he never preached, as some north country laymen with deep religious convictions are wont to do.

‘What is it, captain?’ asked one of the elder men, after a pause. ‘Aught of good luck would be welcome here, for not a poor half-crown’s worth——’

‘Peace, Hiram Young!’ interrupted the captain, with some sternness, as he lifted his bony hand. ‘If there be a heathen

word in our English speech, a word I hate, it is that word "luck," which comes ever so readily to your lips, mates. If there be a word to bring with it confusion to the boastful user thereof, it is that pagan name for a pagan fancy. What is written is written, ay, with pens of flame and ink imperishable, and on a scroll that shall last while time shall endure. And what is written is the thing that shall be, the thing that had been settled before the foundations of the world were laid. Enough. Lads and lasses, ye remember my dream--the dream that on Thursday last I told you of?

'We do!'—'We do!'—'Yes, captain!'—'Yes, Obadiah!'—'Well we mind it!' Such were the eager replies.

It is very probable that few or none of the hearers, save Don, fully compre-

hended the drift of their leader's discourse; yet they were impressed by it, just as a peasant woman abroad, who cannot understand the Latin of the *De Profundis*, trembles with reverential awe as she listens to the thunder of the deep-toned chant. But all remembered their captain's dream, and all felt a thrill of superstitious hope, the rather that Obadiah, like Cromwell, rarely spoke with confidence unless there was something of solid certainty to underlie his words.

‘A black tree, was it not, of which I told you?’ demanded Obadiah, looking around him frowningly, as if to challenge a sceptic. ‘Ay, black as the Black Rood of Jeddart, beyond Tweed, or as the swart timbers of the Maiden of Halifax, that grim engine of earthly punishment, beneath the gleaming sword-blade of which

many an outlawed head has fallen in our forefathers' time. Yes, a black tree. But fowls roosted in its branches, and bees hummed pleasantly among the flowers that encircled its trunk, and corn and wine and oil were stacked in plenty at its foot. The black tree was the type of abundance. And lo! the dream is fulfilled. Last night, two miles from here, in Dutchman's Bay, there was a landslip, which has laid bare black traces that a boy's inexperienced eye might read as pointing to a mine—a jet-pocket, where lies a buried tree not seen by mortal eye since England was a kingdom. The dream has come true. Quick to gather in the fruits of it.'

‘Hurrah!’ The cheering broke out irrepressibly, the shrill voices of the women and girls blending with the deeper

shout of the men. And then tools and baskets were picked up in a hurry, and there was a prompt movement in the direction of Dutchman's Bay, which lay somewhat to the south of the lower extremity of Beckdale, just as the Soldiers' Slough was at a short distance towards the north. But Obadiah was no mere dreamer of dreams, no mere herald of good tidings; he was a consummate captain, who understood organisation and the value of discipline.

‘No hurry, there! no rushing, comrades!’ he calls out, in a voice which all present had learned to obey. ‘The traces yon turn cliffwards, and the cliff at Dutchman's Bay, as ye ought to know, is crumbly and bad to work. It's not that ye may dig your own graves that I called you. Six of you—six that are

young and strong—go with Don, here, to fetch the wooden props that are ranged in the outhouse of my little place up dale; they will be enough for the present. But, unless my old eyes play me false, or fifty years have not taught me my trade, there'll be many a tough young ash-tree to buy and to cut before we get at the heart of the black jet-tree that lies under ten thousand tons of sand-cliff. Say nothing, if ye meet with idlers on your way. The more sharers, the less to share !'

Dutchman's Bay—so called, probably, on account of some eighteenth or seventeenth century tradition of foreign smugglers—was a long, narrow gulf, with beetling cliffs, in the soft sandstone of which many sea-fowl made their nests and reared their young. During the night a landslip on an extensive scale had taken

place, as Obadiah's practised eye had quickly perceived, for the beach was strewn with heaps and mounds of rubbish, while here and there glinted in the sun a fragment of something black and shining, like bottle-glass, at sight of which a fresh cheer was set up. Seldom indeed did the opening up of a new vein of the precious fossil promise so well. There was a general rush, and many chips and some lumps of the freshly-exposed jet were picked up, while there was a babble of voices.

'It's wonderful!'—'It's Obadiah's dream, indeed!'—'We'll all be rich, rich as Jews!'—'I wouldn't take fifty gold sovereigns for my share, I know!'—'What a go this is!'—'Nobody like our captain!'

Such were some of the exclamations of the sanguine and admiring. Obadiah

himself was mute. He was a more experienced jet-seeker and a more educated man than any there, and he had seen from the first that the lie of the tree, some buried pine of untold ages ago, was towards the cliff. The fragments that peeped from the rubbish-heaps or sparkled on the beach were but broken bits of the fossil conifer, laid to rest in some remote geological epoch beneath the sand and marl of the shifting coast-line. He looked on, then, indulgently as the younger members of his band scrambled excitedly for black flakes and nodules amidst the débris of the landslip, and waited to commence serious operations until Don and the party of volunteers under his orders should arrive with the ashen props, without which it would be suicidal rashness to attack the main fortress of the cliff-wall.

Presently Don and his party arrived, laden with the short, tough pillars of tenacious wood which Obadiah Jedson's prudence had provided, and the assault on Nature's fortress was commenced with a will. Gradually the rumour spread to cottage, and farmstead, and fisher's hut along the sea-shore that the jet-hunters had hit upon an extraordinary mine, or technically, 'pocket,' of the valuable material for which they passed their lives in searching, and that such a yield was forthcoming as, in the memory of man, the Yorkshire sea-coast had never known. By-and-by, exaggerated rumours were current as to the success of the explorers. They had gleaned five hundred pounds' worth, it was reported, before dinner-time, the early dinner-hour of country-bred toilers. They were picking up jet in

lumps like those of Newcastle coal, and at a rate that would cheapen the value of it in Whitby and Scarborough for twenty years to come. They had been offered by a Daneborough tradesman, a thousand pounds for their venture, and they had refused it—all of which was eminently fictitious.

The higher the social rank, the more slowly does gossip permeate towards the possessors of it. Every hind or fisherman in or near Beckdale had heard of the exceedingly good fortune of Obadiah Jedson's roving company hours before the news was conveyed to Woodburn Parsonage. And it was late in the afternoon when the rector himself, his wife, his children, and his beautiful ward, Violet Mowbray, appeared on the hard, firm sea-sand of the upper end of Dutchman's Bay, where a crowd

had collected, and where two coast-guardsmen were, by their lieutenant's orders, present to enforce order. But though the honest fellows strolled to and fro, their cutlasses clanking at their sides, there was really no occasion for their attendance. Nothing could be more orderly than the behaviour of the crowd. Yorkshire dalesmen and blue-jackets of any part of the coast have an instinctive, if rude, sense of justice and of the rights of property. The jet-hunters had begun their hunt alone, and alone they had, by the unwritten law of the beach, the right to finish it, unvexed by the claim of any interloper. At the first any stray adventurer might have struck in, but now an uninvited intruder would have found popular opinion, and perhaps lynch law, strongly against him.

Still more striking was the scene by

torchlight that evening, the red smoky glare of the flambeaux contrasting with the pale silvery flicker of the June moonlight, as the jet-hunters pushed their galleries deeper and deeper into the cliff-front. Still a mob of idlers hung about the spot, like flies round a jar of honey. But there was nothing envious, nothing unworthy, in the feelings of the lookers-on; so far as could be judged from their talk. It was the jet-hunters' luck, of course—a rare stroke of luck; but then it was universally admitted that old Captain Jedson and his company deserved their luck, and had, in fact, done much, by untiring research, to earn the opportunity by which they were profiting. One thing there was from which the spectators appeared to derive much satisfaction: Rufus Crouch was not one of the busy band of jet-winners

now engaged in driving their burrows, like so many rabbits in human shape, deep into the cliff. Rufus Crouch was absent. It must be presumed that the return Australian gold-digger had not conciliated the good opinion of the neighbourhood, so hearty was the chuckling and so sincere the delight of the crowd, as the probable disappointment of the travelled jet-hunter was the subject of discussion.

‘Not a penny of it for old Rufus!’—
‘Won’t Crouch be mad when he hears of it?—a bumptious chap like that, who even argues against Captain Obadiah himself.’—
‘He’s up in London.’—‘Ha ! ha ! ha !’

In the course of the evening Mr. Langton, this time alone, came down to the beach, and had an opportunity of seeing and speaking with the old captain of the jet-seekers.

‘We hope to make a good business of this, sir,’ said Obadiah, in a low voice, ‘though not a tithe, at best, of what chattering tongues proclaim. But what I should do without Don I cannot think. I am getting in years, and stiff, and cannot be everywhere, and that brave boy is like another self to lead the way. But for him, and but for me, these poor silly creatures, in their hurry, would neglect prop and lintel, and get a score of tons of sand down on their wretched heads as the reward of their thoughtlessness. But Don is worth a thousand.’

Late into the night the torches burned, and the work went on, until at last the wearied jet-hunters desisted from their task, and fell asleep around their fires of wreck-wood.

CHAPTER VIII.

SIR ROBERT INTRODUCES HIMSELF.

SOME ten days, or twelve, had elapsed since Rufus Crouch, ex-gold-digger and present jet-hunter, called so unexpectedly at the Shirley mansion in Hyde Park. The morning was a bright and sunny one, with but a few lazy clouds of fleecy whiteness sailing across the blue sky, as the Rector of Woodburn, with his family, returning after a week-day service from the church hard by, saw, slowly riding out of the parsonage garden, a gentleman,

followed by a mounted groom. Visitors in that thinly-peopled district were rare and usually well-known, so that this well-dressed stranger, on his black horse, attracted some notice. Mr. Langton stepped forward and bowed. The stranger lifted his hat with a pleasant smile, and instantly dismounted and threw the reins to his groom.

‘ Mr. Langton ?’ he said, inquiringly. ‘ Allow me to be my own introducer. My name is Shirley—Sir Robert Shirley—a neighbour of yours, since I have just arrived at Helston, and I have taken the liberty of coming across to call at the rectory, emboldened by the fact, Mr. Langton, of my father’s old friendship with yourself. I have so often heard him speak of you, and always cordially and with expressions of high esteem, so that I trust

you will pardon my lack of ceremony.'

The baronet made his introductory speech very well, with just the proper amount of feeling expressed in his well-modulated voice.

'Most happy to make your acquaintance, Sir Robert,' exclaimed Mr. Langton, genuine pleasure in his eyes and tone as he stretched out his hand in greeting. 'Yes, I knew your father, the late Sir Robert, and was under no trifling obligations to him, as you are perhaps aware. It was he who, when my health broke down, presented me to the living of Woodburn here, of which you, of course, are the patron, as he was. Allow me to introduce you to my wife, Mrs. Langton, as the son of a very old and kind friend, who will always be welcome under my poor roof.'

So Sir Robert was made known to Mrs.

Langton and to pretty Violet Mowbray, and to the olive branches of the Langton family now at home—two girls and a boy, in the hobbydyhoy stage of life. And Sir Robert smiled and bowed, and spoke very nicely and not too much, and acted his self-imposed part with consummate care and skill. He had, he felt, been relieved from one great danger at the first. When he commenced his seemingly unstudied address he had been unaware as to how much, or how little, the parson of Woodburn had known concerning his former relations with his father. It must be confessed that when the baronet alluded to laudatory expressions on his papa's part concerning the Reverend Samuel Langton, he was drawing boldly on his imagination. The one salient fact of which he was sure was the presentation to the living, and that the giving of it had

been a gift indeed, and no matter of barter. Sir Robert himself had sold the advowson privately, and could no more appoint a future Rector of Woodburn than he could a Dean of Westminster. But he had no objection to Mr. Langton believing that so much of ecclesiastical patronage yet was his, and he was glad that the clergyman evidently knew nothing of the coldness, the quarrels, the estrangement that had existed between his father and himself during the latter years of his father's life. Sir Robert had not been a pattern son, but he congratulated himself that Mr. Langton was unaware of this.

Then followed a hearty invitation to luncheon at the parsonage. 'You *must* break bread with us,' the rector insisted, genially; and Mrs. Langton was able to second her husband's proposition, not only

graciously, but with few of those qualms and doubts which are apt to beset a prudent housewife when a guest of superior rank and wealth is suddenly bidden to share the family meal. But they kept a better-supplied table at Woodburn than is invariably to be found in clerical homes, and hence, when Sir Robert, after a faint show of reluctance, allowed himself to be persuaded, his acceptance did not fill his hostess with dismay. The groom and horses, therefore, were sent down to the village inn, while the baronet, becoming at each instant more and more at home with his kindly entertainers, walked on with them towards the house.

‘I was almost sinful enough, Mr. Langton, to covet this charming place of yours,’ said Sir Robert, ‘when first I caught sight of it. These pretty flower-beds and the

smooth lawn and the smooth paths make me ashamed of the tangled wilderness that they call a garden up at Helston. I hope, if Mrs. Langton will give me the benefit of her kind advice, to get the grounds there laid into better order soon, but for the moment everything wears the aspect of neglect. I hope to be a good deal in Yorkshire, now.'

Mrs. Langton was a kind, homely woman, simple—nay, more simple than her husband, whose book-lore was not armour-proof against the wiles of a worldling such as the master of Shirley. She was pleased to have her flowers praised, and lingered to point out the merits of this or that favourite rose-tree and such-and-such a bank of azaleas, and had no idea that the astute town-bred man was only anxious to enlist her as a partisan. Violet Mowbray said

never a word. She looked shy, more timid even than was usual with her; nor did Sir Robert's eyes dwell upon her beautiful young face. There were two things against which he was especially on his guard. The first of these was to avoid the character of a London dandy and fine gentleman, such personages being in rustic neighbourhoods reputed cynical, selfish, and, worst of all, satirical. Secondly, the baronet wished to give no inkling that Miss Mowbray's attractions had been the magnet that had drawn him to the humble Parsonage of Woodburn. Wherefore he scarcely turned his glance towards her at all, seeming to regard her, as he did gawky Maud and Julia and their stripling brother John, as a mere adjunct to the more important elders of the household.

‘ You seldom visit London, I believe, Mr.

Langton?' asked Sir Robert, when they were all seated at table.

'Very seldom indeed; I may more truthfully say, never,' replied the rector, as a momentary expression of pain passed across his face at the recollection of hopes long since frustrated, and honours, which once seemed almost within his grasp, relinquished. 'Nor do I keep up an active correspondence with such of my former friends as are still in the busy world. My letters would only bore them, and theirs could hardly be of profound interest to me. They are in the arena yet, while I have long ago renounced my chance of a crown, whether of palm or laurel. No, Sir Robert, I am a country clergyman, and my cares are bounded by the narrow limits of my parish.'

Again the visitor felt a thrill of gratification. There are still parsons as parson-

like and as secluded from metropolitan tittle-tattle as was Goldsmith's 'Vicar of Wakefield.' And there are others who are proud of the clubs they belong to, the frequency of their trips to town, and on being well posted up in metropolitan gossip. Now, Sir Robert's name was one that, without being actually infamous, was, at any rate, not in the very best odour. Nothing had been proved against him; certainly not. But then, that social verdict of 'Not Proven' is a darkling shadow that dogs a man's steps, and is not to be shaken off. The baronet was very glad to find that his hospitable acquaintance had never heard of his dubious reputation among the denizens of Pall Mall.

In the meantime, the ripening of the new acquaintance into friendship, or, at any rate, into that vague stage of liking which

precedes friendship, went swimmingly on. Sir Robert was, what very few fashionable men of our day are, a conversationalist, a talker who knew how to practise a lost art, and to relieve the monotony of ordinary intercourse by providing a higher species of intellectual entertainment than the mere interchange of short statements as to facts. There never were, at any one time, since the days when the wits tapped their gold snuff-boxes in Wills's Coffee-house, many talkers of the male sex, but their words were usually worth the trouble of listening to, and they had a strange power of riveting their audience. The lord of Shirley was not merely fluent and graphic in his discourse, but skilled in his choice of topics. He had travelled and had read, and had the knack of using his literary stores so as to eke out his personal reminiscences

cleverly enough, but without a dash of pedantry. The rector was pleased with a guest who had the grace to say so little of the London from which he was himself practically excluded, and so much of Damascus, Sicily, Florence, Egypt, the Engadine. It was not Mr. Langton's fault that he had not had time to make acquaintance with Pharpar, and Abana, and the Lake of the Meadows, of the glorious city that Khaled and his half-clad Moslems conquered, or with the Golden Shell of orange-bowered Palermo, or with solemn Egypt. Florence, and Milan, and Venice, and Switzerland he *had* seen, but he knew them better from books than by actual experience. And then Sir Robert talked about all these places in so well-bred a way, with such deference towards Mr. Langton's well-known scholarship, and put forward

his own opinions as to Saracenic architecture, Greeks, Turks, and Arabs, in so modest and tentative a fashion, that his clerical entertainer never dreamed that he was being 'drawn out,' as the phrase is, and tempted to ride his own hobbies as he listed.

Mrs. Langton also was much predisposed in the favour of her titled visitor. She had suffered much, as country-folks do suffer much, under the infliction of the company of those who have little to say for themselves, and whose little is so stale by dint of frequent repetition. The neighbouring clergy, the two or three gentlemen of independent means who lived within hail, the doctor of the union, and the officer of the coastguard, were all excellent persons, but quite the reverse of amusing. Sir Robert was a bird of much brighter plumage than any that harboured near

Woodburn, and, once that he found himself accepted at his own valuation, he did his very best that his singing should please the ears and tickle the imagination of his auditors. Then he talked of Helston, and of his own design to live there, to render the neglected old place trim and orderly, and to cultivate neighbourly relations with those who had formerly been known to himself or his father.

‘Yorkshire visiting, I believe, Mrs. Langton,’ he said, cheerily, ‘was once limited only by the number of miles to which our forefathers’ carriage-horses could be induced to drag the clumsy old coaches in which our grandmothers were content to jolt along; and, if we live in less heroic times, at any rate I hope to see something of friends within a moderate compass.’

And then he said something as to a

notion that had struck him as to the feasibility of a garden party or gipsy picnic in the Helston grounds, which, if ill kept, were rocky and romantic. 'I should like to try it,' he said, 'if only I could get any ladies to accept the awkward hospitality of a blundering bachelor like myself. I thought so directly I saw the place.'

Luncheon was over. The fernery, the tiny hot-house, the exquisite peeps at the sea which, through overhanging ivy-tangles and festoons of noisette roses, the different windows afforded, had been one and all exhibited and admired. Even the albums of photographs and rare sea-weed on the drawing-room tables had been surveyed. John Langton's toy ship, a model schooner, four feet long, of the construction and rigging of which the boy was very proud,

though frank enough to own how much assistance he had received from 'Mr. Don,' was next shown. 'I should never have got her so taut and smart by myself,' said the youngster; 'but then, Don is such a fine fellow!'

'And who is Mr. Don? A Spanish sailor, I presume, or possibly a Neapolitan, since they use the Spanish title there?' asked Sir Robert, trying not to yawn.

Mr. Langton took it upon himself to answer. 'It is difficult,' he said, with a smile, 'to say what Mr. Don is, and what he is not. I never had a pupil to match him. He is the handsomest lad from here to Sunderland, and about the boldest. He is only a jet-hunter, living by a precarious industry peculiar to our sea-coast, but out of a crowd you would at once select him

as a gentleman, though whence he came or what was the rank of his parents, no one knows. A fine fellow, Don !'

'I am sure of it,' returned Sir Robert, with every appearance of interest. Then the baronet's groom and horses came round to the door, and there was a hearty leave-taking, with pledges of future friendship, and the visitor rode off gracefully towards his lonely home at Helston. More than once during the ride Sir Robert showed his white teeth with a triumphant air.

'A good beginning,' he muttered. 'I saw the girl's eyes glisten more than once as I spoke of the East and of sunny Italy. If I can touch her youthful fancy and it is all right about the money, why, then !'—and he rode on.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE SQUARE CHAMBER.

IN Dutchman's Bay, the work which had been begun some four or five days before went steadily on, thanks to the authority which Obadiah Jedson was able to exercise over the members of his band. There was no necessity, as in some branches of industry, to stimulate laggards by reproaches or threats. The real difficulty was to insure that the labour should not be pressed on without regard to the safety of those who performed it. As it was, men, women,

and boys worked feverishly, almost fiercely, overtasking their strength when allowed, and reluctantly giving up the turn of duty to a less weary comrade. The imaginations of the jet-seekers were all aflame, so promising were the signs, and so hopeful appeared to be the enterprise in which they were engaged. 'This should be more than a pocket—this be a mine, sure!' was a not infrequent remark among them as they snatched their hasty meals. Now, a 'pocket,' or deposit of jet, is what the seeker expects, unless singularly unlucky or raw to the trade, to hit upon in the course of each summer campaign. But a mine of the black fossil is now so rare, so much more seldom found than in the earlier years of the eighteenth century, that it may be truly said to exist only in tradition.

No ; there are in England, the natural home of jet, no available jet-mines, nothing to match with the amber-mines of Pomerania and other North German provinces ; precious properties, that are by no means open to all comers, but which form the best farms on the estate of some needy, haughty Count or Frei Herr of Prussia, who has to provide the portion of the young baronesses or countesses, his daughters, and the army allowances of the young counts or barons, his sons, out of the yellow yield of his carefully husbanded amber-diggings amid the sand-hills of the sea-shore. But, if there are now in England no actual mines of jet, there are legends of such mines long ago, and of fortunate jet-hunters who became burgesses and aldermen of their towns, and married mayors' daughters, and lived and died and

were buried among the worshipful of the snug old unreformed civic corporations, all on account of the heaps of glistening jet which their spades had won. In such stories there was nothing heroic, nothing sublime, but much that suggested promotion, comfort, gratified vanity, and social success. And here was, possibly, that El Dorado of the jet-seekers, a real mine of the precious black stuff, just about to be brought to light for the emolument of the finders.

How they worked, these roving explorers of the seashore! Nothing, with some natures, so braces up the nerves for toil as the notion that the labour, extravagantly hard for the moment though it be, is to do away for ever with the hated necessity of earning daily bread. This it is that makes the diamond-seekers of Kimberley and

Dutoit's Pan, under the hot sun of South Africa, work as never men worked before, save under pressure of the slave-driver's cruel lash, outworking even the miners of golden California and auriferous Australia, because each hopes to be the Sinbad who shall win the great prizes in the Valley of Diamonds, and so go home a capitalist, and work no more. In Dutchman's Bay, on a small scale, the same spirit was rife.

The grim, gaunt captain had need of all the prestige that clung to him, to keep his band from proceedings that would have been little short of sheer suicide. But for him the cliff would already have been pierced by half-a-score of tunnels—narrow, low, and unpropped as to the crumbling roofs—mere graves, into which the eager diggers of them would have crowded recklessly, careless as to whether the acci-

dental removal of a stone might not have brought down the crushing weight of tons of sand to fill the cavity and bury its occupants. As it was, old Obadiah Jedson, aided by Don, had contrived to restrict the excavation to three parallel galleries of reasonable height, and the roofs of which were made comparatively secure by ashen props, and, at intervals, by stout wooden lintels spanning the passages. There was also a square chamber, or central hall, towards which the galleries converged, and which was of use as helping to keep up a supply of air, communicating as it did by a comparatively short corridor with the adit, or outer entrance of the mine.

Rufus Crouch had returned to Woodburn, and had readily been received as a partner in the enterprise, as had also six or seven other absent jet-hunters, who

had come hurrying back from the north at the first tidings of the good fortune of their comrades. And, after some demur, sundry volunteers, who were not regular or occasional members of the jet-seekers' company, had been permitted to become sharers in the work in hand and in the ultimate profits. Full-grown men of good character, and whose hardened muscles might be counted on to endure the strain, were alone accepted by Captain Jedson, who was inexorable in rejecting the offers of the eager-eyed striplings and girls who had hastened to the mouth of the mine. 'No, no,' the old man would say kindly, but in a tone that brooked no remonstrance; 'this is a job for the strong to win through. Boys and lasses are best out of it.' And, indeed, the younger and feebler of the jet-seekers were often seen to crawl, gasping,

and with white faces and haggard eyes, out into the free air, utterly overcome by the heat, the vitiated atmosphere, and the toil in a contracted space, where to stand upright was impossible.

In the evening of the fifth day since the commencement of the mining operations, the rector and his family strolled along the beach to the Dutchman's Bay, accompanied by Sir Robert Shirley. The accomplished baronet had by this time succeeded in establishing something like intimacy between himself and the inmates of Woodburn Parsonage. Mr. Langton had been prompt in returning the visit of the son of his former patron, and Sir Robert had willingly accepted his invitation to partake of tea and strawberries on that balmy summer's evening which witnessed the expedition to the jet-mine.

‘I don’t feel in the least alarmed,’ the baronet had said laughingly, as they rambled along the shore towards Dutchman’s Bay, in answer to Mrs. Langton’s mention of the excessive heat of the cave. ‘It is difficult to believe that anything can more accurately reproduce the Black Hole of Calcutta than some London drawing-rooms in the height of the season ; and as for a possible avalanche of earth and stones—well, the very suddenness of such a catastrophe would leave no time for fear. And I really am much interested in these remarkable parishioners of yours, Mr. Langton. I know nothing about jet, except that I have seen brooches and shirt-studs of it in jewellers’ windows, so that the whole thing is delightfully new to me.’

‘I can scarcely claim the jet-hunters’ company as members of my flock,’ an-

swered Mr. Langton. 'Their captain, old Obadiah Jedson, with whom I have the privilege of being acquainted, and who has a house at the lower end of Beckdale, is indeed a sort of parishioner of mine, although he goes to church and chapel quite impartially, and holds, as I fancy, wild and mystical ideas on matters of religion. Yes, Obadiah is a very worthy man; nor do I know any harm, but rather good, of those who compose his gang. His young lieutenant, Don—whose name, Sir Robert, I think I have mentioned to you before—is an especial favourite with me and with all of us. I wonder, if you see him to-night, how he will impress you.'

'Favourably I feel convinced,' smoothly returned Sir Robert. 'I never did see a village genius myself, but I can imagine that this swan of yours is a genuine cygnet,

and no bird of meaner plumage. But we have arrived, I conclude, for yonder is the hole in the cliff, with rubbish-mounds all around it, and people swarming near like ants about an ant-hill. Very ant-like, too, are these basket-bearers whom I see coming out, each with his load. And what is that which twinkles and glows through the darkness, like a red star?’

It was Violet Mowbray to whom the question was addressed, and she made answer shyly.

‘It’s a torch, I think, which is kept always burning in the square chamber, as they call it, of the mine. We saw it yesterday.’

At the very mouth of the mine the party of visitors encountered a miner coming out, who shaded his eyes with his broad hand, and peered out into the twilight. A red-

bearded man this, brawny of limb and awkward of gait, and whose hairy face was dark with heat and toil. 'Where are those ash plants? Not come, eh? The lazy hound that sold them promised to cart them here before sundown; and if I were captain——' Here his restless eyes lit on Sir Robert Shirley's impassive face, and, with a growl like that of a bear disturbed in his lair, he made a half-sheepish, half-sullen attempt at a salute, and shambled away. Nothing in the baronet's attitude or demeanour would have told that he had ever seen Rufus Crouch before.

The square chamber once reached, Sir Robert was compelled to admit that even the atmosphere of the most crowded London assembly was less trying than that of this, the central hall, without which the narrow passages could not have been ten

able for more than a few minutes at a time. Here, by the gleam of the blazing torches, they were shown the jet that had been already won—how few and poor did the few handfuls of black lumps and chips, lying at the bottom of a small box of common deal, appear in comparison with the almost frantic toil that was going on! Obadiah Jedson, his lofty head almost touching the irregular roof of the cavern, and grimly picturesque of garb and mien, received his visitors with solemn politeness as he stood there, torch in hand.

‘ You are right, sir,’ he said, in answer to Mr. Langton; ‘ it is as hot even here as I have ever known it in Brazil. But this is cool, to the galleries. Yet they bear it with wonderful courage and endurance, our mates, and never leave their labour, as you see, till they are absolutely compelled to

breathe the purer air.' And at this moment, from the middle passage, there emerged the figure of a young miner, feebly dragging himself along on hands and knees, and who sank fainting on the floor the instant that the more spacious chamber was reached.

'It's young Joe Nixon!' exclaimed old Captain Obadiah, as he strode across the vaulted chamber, and lifted the tall stripling in his mighty arms, as a grown man might lift a child. 'Poor Joe! he's about the last of our young ones to stand the murdering heat of the galleries. First the boys broke down, then the girls, smothered with the foul air. Joe alone held out. It's grown and seasoned men, not lathy lads, should face yonder heavy heat and killing air.'

'Poor fellow!'—'Poor boy!' exclaimed Mrs. Langton and Violet Mowbray anxious-

ly, as they saw the tall young jet-seeker, with his death-like pallor, and dim half-open eyes, laid upon the floor, and propped against the wall, while Obadiah, kneeling beside him, supported his heavy head. The rector, too, looked anxious, while Sir Robert Shirley contemplated the unfortunate digger as he might have done a big fish just drawn to land. There was a bottle at hand, and a gulp or two of the cordial it contained enabled Joe to stammer out, 'I'm right, thank ye, captain; I feel better now. But Irish Larry is pretty nigh gone, and Mr. Don and old Master Peterson are getting him along.' And, a minute later, the grey-haired veteran, Mark Peterson, appeared, staggering under his share of the weight of his helpless burden. Very ghastly, inert, and unconscious did the stalwart young Irish-

man seem as he was thus borne forth, utterly overcome by the vitiated air of the mine.

‘Dr. Conkling is outside,’ said somebody ; ‘better let the doctor look to the poor chap at once.’ And strong arms were not lacking to relieve those of his present bearers, and to carry forth the insensible form of Irish Larry to the free air of heaven and the presence of the doctor.

‘This is my young friend Don—Mr. Don they style him, usually,’ explained the rector, coming forward—‘of whom, Sir Robert, you have heard me speak. This gentleman, Don, is Sir Robert Shirley, a neighbour of ours now.’ Don, flushed and breathless, took off the sailor’s cap that rested on his silken curls, and somehow Sir Robert Shirley felt himself constrained to lift his own hat with as much of grave politeness as if he had just been intro-

duced on the Pall Mall pavement to a social equal.

‘How came the cub to be a gentleman?’ muttered the worldly baronet, behind his dark moustache. A strange contrast, as seen by the ruddy light of the glaring torch, those two presented: the hackneyed man of the world, with his darkling eyes and pallid face, handsome, specious, sneering when it was not to his advantage to keep up a character for good nature—and that noble youth, so full of fire and energy frankness, who now confronted him. There was not a tinge of awkwardness in Don’s bearing, and yet nothing could be more simple or more modest than his air as he turned to acknowledge the greeting of Mrs. Langton and her ward, and the more hearty recognition of the young folks from the parsonage.

‘I have heard a great deal of you, Mr. Don, since I have been in these parts,’ smilingly remarked the baronet.

‘More, I fear, than I merit, Sir Robert, if your information comes from my kind friend Mr. Langton here,’ answered the young man ; and there was something in the ring of his deep rich voice that made the master of Shirley feel, for the second time, as if he were face to face with his equal. Sir Robert, as usual, was fashionably attired, while Don wore the red serge shirt and coarse clothes of a jet-hunter, yet, somehow, the London dandy forgot that the handsome lad before him was not as carefully dressed as himself. Not much more was said, and, indeed, the heat would of itself have been reason enough for curtailing the visitors’ stay in the square chamber of the mine. After a good-

natured word or two from the rector and his wife, they went; but long afterwards the torches continued to blaze, and the work went on, relays of fresh toilers replacing those who reeled away exhausted, until at last, deep in the night, there was an end of labour, and the smouldering bivouac fire of wreck-wood burned itself out to the last ember, and all was darkness and sleep.

CHAPTER X.

AT THORSDALE PARK.

‘BUT, Algernon——’

‘I will have it so ; or else I shall have to obey the commonest rules of prudence : to think exclusively of my own health, and to act accordingly. Of course you can forward my wishes, or thwart them, as you please. I have not lived so long in the world without being keenly alive to the amount—the sickening amount—of heartless selfishness that prevails. I have no right, of course, also, to expect to find

an exception in your ladyship's case.

But——'

'Algernon, dear Algernon——'

'But I have the right, and shall enforce it, to demand consideration not merely for the wishes, but for the welfare, of an ailing and suffering—perhaps dying—husband. I had made arrangements for a protracted stay at Davos or at St. Moritz, unless you choose to exert yourself, as duty dictates. My health has brought me to Yorkshire, as, before long, it may probably take me to the Upper Engadine or elsewhere—I hear good reports of the Rocky Mountains, and of wonderful cures effected among log-cabins high up in Colorado—but, if I consent to stay here, I must protest against being moped to death.'

This last speech, emphatically enunciat-

ed from amidst the downy pillows and wadded wraps of his gouty chair by the Right Honourable the Earl of Thorsdale, did strike his perturbed countess as being supremely unjust and vexatiously provoking. Lady Thorsdale, however, could not afford to be provoked. Her lord was in very truth a lord to her. He was a masterful invalid—a *malade imaginaire*, some said—but at any rate he believed in himself, and in the ailments of which he complained so querulously.

Lord Thorsdale was in many respects a remarkable man. He was among clever men a great noble, and among great nobles a clever man. Once he had sat in the House of Commons, and it was his custom to deplore that he had come to his earldom so early as to cut himself off from the power and popularity that accrue only to states-

men who have won their spurs in the stormy arena of the lower branch of the Legislature. As a peer, he had found no scope for his fretful activity. He had made speeches which the contemptuous newspapers only deigned to report in a compressed form. He had moved resolutions which came to nothing, and resisted compromises which had to be carried into effect. When his party came into power, his party did nothing for him that he considered adequate to his merits. He had been Lord President of the Hanapers, and he had been Chancellor of the Green Wax. But the eye of the nation does not rest continuously on the doings of these exalted but not prominent officials, and Lord Thorsdale had thrown over his administrative functions in disgust. Then he had quarrelled with his party, and had

written pamphlets and magazine articles that were skimmed over because the writer was an earl, but which amused more than they annoyed.

Then Lord Thorsdale tried to be a celebrity as a racing-yacht owner, famous for the challenge cups he won, and an entertainer renowned among the few London dispensers of bachelor hospitality. But his temper was too irritable, and his insight into the minds and motives of others too intuitive and too feminine to permit him to attain eminence in any of these paths to Fame's temple. His matches yielded only average results, his yacht was seldom too far astern of a winner, and the men who hunted with his hounds were as manageable as most men. Yet the earl quarrelled with the boat-builder and his yacht's crew, discarded the

skipper, and left off inviting the friends who accepted his expensive hospitality. Then he married, then he travelled, then he became scientific, eclectic, almost revolutionary, and ended by becoming a vehement valetudinarian.

Lord Thorsdale rode his present hobby very hard. His wife, Constance, had been a daughter of the late Sir Robert Shirley, and was a sister of the reigning Sir Robert. She had a hard time of it. She was handsome—most of the Shirleys had been handsome—and frivolous, and had still some pretensions to take rank as a professional beauty in London drawing-rooms. Nor was she unfit to hold her own, had she but had an ordinary husband to deal with. But she was quite incompetent to resist the energetic will of her earl, who carried all before him by dint of a fluent discourse,

a resolute selfishness, and the magician's wand that ready money supplies. Only last June he had hurried his wife off to the Engadine for two months' residence among the snow-showers, cow-sheds, and general discomforts of that enchanting region, leaving little Lord Thirsk and little Lady Flora at home. The year before he had chosen to waft the entire family in his steam-yacht the *Hecla*, first to Iceland, and later to the glacial coast of Greenland itself: and what the countess had endured from midges, the glare of the Arctic summer sun, solitude, and the terror of the Arctic icebergs and ice-floes, even her lady correspondents only partially knew. Now, at the end of June, this impetuous earl had abruptly rushed down to Thorsdale, declaring that no place was worse than London for his tormenting

gout; and, once in Yorkshire, had proclaimed that it was designed to kill him by mental depression and physical isolation, because the big, lonely mansion did not swarm with visitors.

‘But if you *will* leave London so early, you can’t—indeed you can’t—bring London along with you,’ pleaded the countess, half crying as she spoke.

‘I don’t know that!’ snapped the earl from among his cushions. ‘There are people to be had always who are sick of the worry and racket of that precious season which to you seems like Mecca to the Moslem. And there are people, and sometimes the pleasantest, who are only too glad not to live at their own expense. But I do not care to argue. In my state of health I must consider myself, shamefully neglected as I am. Either this place

must be enlivened—and you used to like that sort of thing—or else the sooner I send for Schültz the courier, and pack up for the Engadine, the better.’

‘But, dear Algernon, you know Sir Joseph said—’ began her ladyship, attempting to turn the flank of her overbearing opponent. But the earl interrupted her.

‘Don’t, I beg of you, quote old Doublefee and his utterances. I have no doubt that Sir Joseph said—anything that an oily-tongued old humbug, who began by feeling King George’s pulse, I believe, and has netted more guineas than would pave Regent Street, found it expedient to say. I think I made a mistake about Yorkshire. Thorsdale used to agree with me, but now I am almost as ill as in Belgrave Square. Perhaps I had better get Sharp

to write for Schültz the courier at once.'

Now, if the countess did hate and dread one human being more than another, it was Schültz the courier. To summon that Teutonic sprite of travel, the idea of whom was inseparably mixed up with wearisome journeys, crowded hotels, and the cramped accommodation of mountain health-resorts, was almost too terrible. So Lady Thorsdale promised to do her best to gratify her earl, and to surround him in Yorkshire with the society from which he had fled when he abandoned London. Something, no doubt, must be done.

But, although it was clear that something must be done, Lady Thorsdale, when she retreated to the feminine stronghold of her own special morning-room—'My Lady's Blue-room' it was called by the starched housekeeper and prize housemaids at

Thorsdale—was puzzled. She was, as most women of the world are, a deft and untiring correspondent, a sort of constant letter-writer, and she instinctively seated herself before her *bijou* writing-table, with its load of elegant stationery. Then she began to think. It was high season in mighty, roaring London, and it is, or was, high treason against Her Imperious Majesty Queen Fashion to be absent from the mass of metropolitan worshippers who crowd around the central shine. But then, these are restless days, and people, even of bluest blood and of fortune stupendous, do such odd things—even running out of town for weeks and fortnights, and making society irregular and uncertain. And then, so very many other people, with or without the blue blood, but unquestionably without the stupend-

ous fortune, found it desperately difficult to make both ends meet at the end of the year. She got out a little book, carefully tabulated, and began to look over the names that it contained, There were neat compartments in each page, wherein, as in the black-book of some foreign prefect of police, were set down briefly the antecedents of the persons mentioned. Some of the countess's friends would have felt uncomfortable or indignant had they been able to peep over her shoulder, as she read the annotations in their particular case.

‘ Ah, well ! I think I can manage it,’ said Lady Thorsdale to herself; and then she began to write. Her pen flew fast across the perfumed and coroneted paper. Her ready invention and her practised skill stood her in good stead, and so did her retentive memory, though, to be sure, she

refreshed the latter by sundry consultations of the little ledger before her. ‘“I hear your darling Georgy”—Gertrude—what is the brat’s name?—“has grown even handsomer than when I saw her at Cowes.”

‘“How proud you must have been at the success of your son, that clever Mr. Edward, in the final examination!” Yes, the insupportable young wretch *is* Edward, though I read it Edmund at the first.’

These, and similar soliloquies, as she addressed her ‘Dear Floras’ and ‘Dearest Mrs. Somebodies,’ may be thought to indicate that the countess was slightly insincere. So she was, to some extent, but not more hollow in her pretences of affectionate interest than are many other women of the world—her world. She chose her hunting-grounds well, selecting

needy people, eccentric people, people who had, as she well knew, sustained some social defeat, and would be glad of a decent excuse for hiding their discomfiture by a decorous retreat; and, lastly, people who had not this year ventured on the expense of a London pilgrimage at all, but were vegetating in the country, or in some half-empty watering-place. And to each and all she was clever enough to offer some attraction. She was expecting, so she said, very brilliant guests, and very diverting guests, and guests whose rank was exalted, all of whose names she mentioned, but with such artless art that she did not stand committed to any assertion that could not easily be explained away. And she generally contrived to insinuate that the distinguished persons who were coming were 'dying to know' the probably less

distinguished persons whom she was now desirous of sweeping into her net, and of tempting to Thorsdale Park. Altogether, it must be owned that she baited her mouse-trap very well.

Presently, when the pretty, perfumed notes lay strewed in heaps upon the ivory table, the countess conceived a bright idea. She had heard, through the tattle of servants—for there was little of fraternal intercourse kept up between herself and the baronet—that Sir Robert Shirley was at Helston, hard by, and that he seemed disposed to stay there. Now, Lady Thorsdale was not on very intimate terms with her brother. There had been some unpleasantness in their father's lifetime about the marriage-portion of the countess expectant. Robert's signature was required for the raising of the necessary

sum, and Robert would sign nothing without being handsomely paid for it. And then his dubious repute, and the queer things that were whispered concerning him and his associates, had caused a coldness to exist between the present master of Shirley and his sister ennobled. Now, however, she bethought her of her brother, of his tact, of his social resources, and of what she had seen him do when he chose to make himself agreeable. So she penned him the sweetest of little sisterly notes, congratulating herself on having him as a neighbour, warmly inviting him to Thorsdale, and entreating him to be charitable enough to do his best to brighten up the old house, and aid to enliven poor dear Algernon in the blues. And she signed herself his 'ever affectionate sister, Constance Thorsdale,' and

sent off the letter by a mounted groom.

Sir Robert Shirley, when he read his sister's charming little epistle, smiled as Mephistopheles or Talleyrand might have done.

‘Conny wants something!’ he remarked; ‘so do I. This will help me with the Woodburn Parsonage people better than she dreams of.’

CHAPTER XI.

A L O N E L Y R I D E .

‘It was a pity, too!’ said the rector, genuine sympathy in his voice. ‘A pity, Don, my poor fellow! All your work, all your peril, for nothing! I never arraign the Fates, but it does seem to me as if, in your case, destiny had been a little over-hard with you jet-hunters.’

‘That, dear Mr. Langton,’ replied Don, cheerfully, ‘is too classical, too pagan a standpoint, as my foster-father, Captain Jedson, would say, from which to regard

our late mishap. I, for one, find no fault with fickle fortune because our grand jetmine at Dutchman's Bay has collapsed. Brittle, friable sandstone will break up, and props give way, and a gradual landslip demolish what a sudden landslip first suggested. Anyhow, we have come out of it, if not much enriched, at any rate without serious accident to life or limb.'

'And that, Mr. Don, is chiefly due to your courage, and your unselfish readiness to face any risk and undertake any labour for your comrades' sake,' interposed Mrs. Langton, warmly. 'But for you, there would have been fresh-dug graves in Woodburn churchyard, and widows and orphans weeping for the loss of the breadwinner. I hear that Captain Obadiah Jedson gives the whole praise to you, and old Lieutenant Firebrace, of the coast-

guard, says you are the sort of stuff of which Nelson's officers were made; and that from him, who fought, as you know, at Navarino, and despises modern men and ways, is no light compliment.'

'Yes, Mr. Don, we heard of what you did, and trembled for you, I am sure, before you had got clear of that underground place, with the two poor fellows who were trapped there when the roof gave way,' exclaimed Violet Mowbray, with a sort of shy enthusiasm that brought tears to her eyes, and caused the mantling blood to rise to her soft cheek. 'And we were all so glad to hear that no harm came of it.'

'Harm seldom comes, Miss Mowbray, I believe, from merely doing one's duty,' answered Don, gravely. He was always serious, and almost bashful in manner,

when he spoke to Violet, although his heart throbbed wildly as his ear drank in the welcome words of praise that fell from her lips. 'At any rate,' he added, 'there is an end of jet-hunting for the moment; so, Mr. Langton, I have ventured up here, with my books, to crave a lesson, if you can kindly spare me the time for one, and are at leisure.'

'Of leisure, Don, my boy, I have only too much,' replied the clergyman, genially; 'and it is a pleasure to me to resume my old task of tuition with a pupil whom not even hero-worship can spoil. So, if you like, we will adjourn to my study.'

It is strange by what invisible links our fortunes are bound to those of another. At first sight, it might have appeared as if no proceedings on the part of Sir Robert Shirley, of Shirley Park, could conceivably

influence the future weal or woe of so comparatively humble a person as Obadiah's adopted son, and the rector's favourite pupil. So, at all events, it would have seemed to the baronet himself, as, on his black horse, but unattended by a groom, he rode slowly along, deep in thought, while, amidst the well-stored book-shelves at Woodburn Parsonage, Don and Mr. Langton were busy with the lore of a bygone day. Sir Robert, it has been mentioned, was absorbed in thought, as, with slackened reins and downcast eyes, he rode on, so that when a carriage, coming along at a brisk pace between the high banks that lined the road, suddenly overtook him, he did not hear or heed the sound of wheels, and was only apprised of their approach when his horse violently started and swerved, in a manner that

would have unseated many a careless rider. Sir Robert, however, was too practised a horseman to be easily discomposed, so that he merely gathered up his loosened reins, and, recognising the occupants of the barouche, took off his hat with a smile of amiable insincerity.

‘So glad!’ he said, riding close up to the open carriage, the liveried driver of which had now pulled up his horses at a word from his noble mistress. The equipage, indeed, was that of the Countess of Thorsdale, and beside her ladyship lounged, wrapped in plaids and shawls, the listless form of the earl himself. ‘I did not hear your wheels, Constance, until you overtook me,’ explained the baronet; ‘our Yorkshire roads are solitary hereabouts. Well, Thorsdale, this fine day has tempted you out early, I see.’

‘The more fool I!’ peevishly retorted Sir Robert’s noble brother-in-law. ‘This treacherous climate is worse, absolutely worse, than that of the Riviera itself, with its dust and its marrow-piercing mistral. I feel there is rain coming on—humidity in the atmosphere—and it racks my gout and unstrings my nerves. What my health requires is an equable temperature. I have told Sharpe, my secretary, to write for details as to two places, one in the Carpathians, the other in the Rocky Mountains, of which I have heard good accounts.’

The countess made haste to express her wifely hopes that her ailing lord might yet be reconciled to Yorkshire and England, and to paint a rose-coloured picture of the forthcoming gaieties at Thorsdale Park.

‘You, Robert, have hitherto been a sad truant,’ she said, playfully shaking a gloved

forefinger at her brother. 'We have been here a week in our exile, and have seen you but once at Thorsdale. I must insist now that you come home with us, and stay to luncheon.'

'I'm sure it would be a charity on your part,' chimed in his lordship, more graciously than usual.

Lord Thorsdale's very graciousness was somewhat graceless, as that of a profoundly selfish man is apt to be. He did not care a straw for Sir Robert Shirley, and despised his character, but he would have been glad, in his self-seeking way, to have the man over to Thorsdale to amuse him; and he hardly cared that in expressing a desire for his brother-in-law's company he was proclaiming his indifference for the society of his wife.

'So you see, my dear Robert, that you

have fallen into our hands, and that we will take no denial,' said the countess, with her prettiest manner, and with her falsest smile.

'Awfully kind of both of you; but, unfortunately, I have an appointment with a friend,' rejoined Sir Robert, almost drily. 'Before long, depend upon it, I shall look up at Thorsdale, and so often that you will vote me a bore. But to-day my time is not my own.' There was a brief leave-taking, and the carriage rolled off.

'How very odd Robert was to-day!' exclaimed the countess, feminine vexation at being baulked of a wish predominating over her habitual desire to make, ostensibly, the best of her brother. 'And where could he be going to in this desolate region? He really did seem as if he were ashamed of himself.'

‘You are always talking nonsense, my dear, and making mountains out of molehills!’ growled the earl, as he shifted uneasily among his downy cushions. Meanwhile, Sir Robert, turning his head to ascertain by ocular evidence that the barouche, with its liveried servants and high-stepping greys, was out of sight, wheeled his own horse, rode back for a short distance, and then struck into a cart-track that branched off from the macadamised road, and led into the wild and lonely moorland.

‘Let me see,’ he murmured, pulling out of the breast-pocket of his coat a scratch-map, roughly pencilled, such as hunting men often carry. ‘Yes, this *must* be the way; and presently some shepherd will be at hand to direct me.’

A ride, even on a fine day, into the bleak North Yorkshire moorland is not

over-tempting to a London Sybarite, such as was Sir Robert Shirley. Not even in Scotland are the wastes more bare, the bogs more treacherous, the tall heather ranker, or the bridle-paths more stony. The district into which the baronet had now plunged was one of those stern and savage fells where break-neck ravines alternate with rugged stretches of red-brown table-land, watered here and there by tiny runlets of trickling water, and seamed by emerald green patches of alluring turf, the shallowest of which is a quagmire, in which a horse would sink to saddle-flaps. Sir Robert, when a boy, may have crossed such moors in pursuit of grouse or hares, but it is one thing to trudge hopefully forward on the untiring feet of youth, and under the guidance of a veteran game-keeper, and another to pick out the diffi-

cult path for one's self by the aid of a hastily scrawled scratch-map, and such scraps of information as could be elicited from herd-lads and from the white-coated shepherds whose flocks were passed at rare intervals among the fallows, or where a stretch of pasture-land lay like an oasis in the desert. The friend with whom, as the veracious baronet had informed his titled sister, he had an appointment certainly did live in a dreary and inaccessible part of the country, and it was not for a considerable time that Sir Robert could congratulate himself on drawing near to his destination.

‘Robinson Crusoe’s house, ye mean, measter. Yes, yes—red-headed jet-hunter chap—we calls him Robinson!’ bawled a lad behind a loose stone wall, as he leaned upon his spade.

‘You call him Robinson, my boy, I suppose, because he lives all alone?’ suggested the baronet, reining in his horse.

‘Yes ; and a main queer customer he is, from foreign parts,’ replied the boy. ‘Anyhow, yon he lives, down in hollow there. You’re sure to hear the barking of his dogs, once they nose ye !’

For a moment the baronet lingered. The stony hill-sides looked singularly barren and grim ; the hollow between precipitous banks, towards which the lad had pointed with a grimy finger, anything but a cheerful resort. Nor was what he heard respecting the recluse for whom he was inquiring of a remarkably reassuring nature. But the boy, uninquisitive as becomes a rustic, had returned to his digging amongst the potato-beds, and was whistling shrilly as he delved, so that Sir Robert was

ashamed to question him further. He, therefore, rode on. The bridle-track which led down into the darkling hollow was a steep one, while here and there a bank of yellow-flowered bloom, or some great stone that had slipped down from the hillside, seemed to bar the path. Above, the hawks wheeled, soaring, and now and again there was a rustling amidst the tall bracken fern, as if a startled hare had brushed by. but of human habitation there was for some time no sign. A wilder or more desolate spot than that secluded hollow could not readily be found, and Sir Robert, as he carefully descended the steep and rugged path, began to doubt whether his latest informant had not wilfully deceived him, when at last the deep, hoarse barking of a dog reached his ears. Almost instantly the warning note was taken up by

another canine voice, and yet another, as though Cerberus, with his triple head and savage bay, were aroused to guard the shadowy frontiers of Pluto's sable realm. Guided partly by the fierce barking of the dogs, Sir Robert pressed on, and came in sight of a mean hovel, compared with which the wigwam of a Pawnee or the kraal of a Zulu are types of symmetrical architecture. Low, long, and irregularly built, this hideous structure was roofed with boards, bushes, and turf, and the walls consisted chiefly of unhewn boulders of stone, between which the interstices were coarsely plastered, here with clay, there with mud; while the glassless windows were extremely small, and the apology for a chimney, of ill-executed brick-work, rose but some eighteen inches above the rough roof, overgrown with

moss and house-leek. There had been some attempt at enclosing and laying-out a garden, but the idea had been apparently given up, for the fence was broken and the wicket-gate ajar, so that the few disconsolate vegetables which occupied the neglected beds were at the mercy of stray cattle or of the moorland hares.

Chained to the walls of the hut, and sheltered either by a fragment of shattered wood-work or by some mat or morsel of frowsy tarpaulin, propped by a rickety pole, were no less than four lean, fierce dogs, all barking furiously in chorus, and striving to get free, as if to tear the intruder on their domain. A wreath or two of blue wood-smoke rising above the low chimney seemed to give token that the proprietor of this delectable villa residence was to be found at home. For awhile Sir

Robert hesitated, but then, rallying his courage, he rode nearer to the hut, and, dismounting, passed his horse's bridle over the blackened stump of a sturdy old willow-tree that stood hard by. As he approached the door, the two dogs that were tethered nearest sprang savagely towards him, straining their chains, and half choking themselves in the effort to reach him with their glistening fangs. With the butt end of his riding-whip he knocked at the door.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE HUT.

No immediate answer came to the knocking at the crazy door, itself as remarkable a specimen of amateur carpentry, green-painted planks alternating with blue, as could readily be found within the compass of broad Britain. The only immediate effect of the tapping with the butt end of the baronet's gold-mounted whip was to add a stimulus to the savage barking of the four excited dogs, the two nearest of which, dancing on their hind-legs as they tugged

at collar and chain, gnashed their teeth in impotent fury. But after a time the heavy footfall of a man was heard from inside the barrier, and a rough, deep voice exclaimed,

‘Jet-hunter’s jark,* my chap?’

Sir Robert, perplexed and impatient, returned no verbal answer, but tapped again with his whip.

‘If you haven’t got the jark, then, I don’t care to listen to your patter, so sheer off if you value a whole skin, my man—tramp, yokel, or pedlar, whatever you be—for if you bother me more I’ll loose the dogs upon ye. If they leave flesh on your bones, you’re luckier than most.’

‘Why, Crouch!’ exclaimed the bewildered baronet.

Apparently the ferocious inmate of the

* Pass-word.

hovel recognized the voice of his visitor, for the grating sound of rusty bolts was heard, and then the rasping of the reluctant hinges, as the ill-made door was partially opened, and the uncouth figure of Rufus Crouch, with his shaggy red beard and scowling face, appeared in the doorway.

‘So it’s you, is it, Sir R. Shirley, Baronet?’ gruffly demanded the hermit of this singular hermitage, eyeing his guest with a sullen stare.

‘And a queer reception, to say the least of it, I have met with,’ replied Sir Robert, trying to laugh and to look unconcerned. ‘Do you set your dogs upon everybody who comes your way, I wonder?’

‘They’d soon have the life out of a Christian, they would,’ responded Crouch, licking his lips the while, as if he had him-

self been one of the savage mastiffs that snarled and bayed around. ‘Nothing, to make a dog really a tearer, like keeping him always on the chain, with short commons, except when horseflesh is cheap, and then spice him well with that. But you didn’t come here, Sir R., to have a chat about my dogs, did you?’

‘Why, no,’ answered the baronet. ‘What I did want was a few minutes’ conversation on business. I had trouble enough to find you. Your present place of residence lies hidden from the world, friend Rufus, like the abodes of those old anchorites who——’

‘I don’t know anything about anchorites, nor yet anchor-smiths,’ rudely responded Rufus, whose bulky form still blocked up the doorway, and who did not seem to be entirely sober. ‘A man lives where a man

can get to live. In this rotten old country, it seems even a scrap of the worst soil ever a goat starved on belongs to somebody or other. I've got a landlord, it seems. I chose the spot partly because I thought it was a No-man's land that might be had for the taking, and partly because it reminded me of Eaglehawk Rush, a digging out in Gippsland there. Lord Thorsdale's bailiff wanted me to pay rent, or else clear out—called me a trespasser and a poaching vagabond—and the thing ended in a fight, and he swore he'd have the law of me. But Master Bailiff, it seems, was a bruiser, and vain of his reputation in these parts, and he was that much ashamed of the broken head and black eyes I gave him, that he never made his complaint to the magistrates in

Petty Sessions, never set the police on me, nor even earwigged the land-steward, but just let me be, after his licking. And now, what brings you to my poor place, Sir R.?’

The fellow, in his boastfulness, had actually talked himself into something like a good temper, and when Sir Robert, who was quick to note and profit by the change in his mood, cheerily made answer,

‘Only to have a talk, old companion, about the business which brought you to visit me in London, and myself to Yorkshire——’

Rufus in his turn rejoined,

‘All right and tight—hold your noise, you brutes! leave off that noise, I say!’ And there was something of menace in his voice that made the fierce ban-dogs without

cover and shrink, as their hoarse bark sank into a muttering growl. 'Walk in, Sir R., you are free of the hut.'

As he spoke, Rufus withdrew his burly form a little, so as to permit the newcomer to pass in. With some slight hesitation the baronet stepped across that ill-omened threshold. Then Rufus Crouch, first firing off a volley of oaths at the dogs, who had re-commenced their barking as they observed the stranger's advance, re-closed the door and bolted it. The grating of the rusty bolts sounded anything but agreeable in the baronet's ears. However, he was now within the ogre's castle, and had to make the best of it. He glanced about him, and, by the dim light that filtered through the small windows, he beheld such a scene of squalid confusion as hitherto he had never dreamed

of. A hut need not be an untidy or even comfortless abode. Sailors and soldiers have often to live in huts, and find that orderly habits and a little ingenuity make their narrow dwellings fairly endurable. Robinson Crusoe's habitation on his desolate island has been the envy and admiration of adventurous-minded schoolboys from Defoe's days to our own. But here was no order, here was no neatness. All sorts of objects—kegs, boxes, jars, tools, clothes—were littered about. A tin can of petroleum stood beside a basket of potatoes, and in the curling wood-smoke of the smouldering fire dangled by hook and chain a side of bacon, while from the rough rafters swung onions, salted herrings, and cabbages in unsavoury proximity. There were shelves and there were lockers, but the latter were half open, and the

former were lumbered with incongruous articles. Above the rude fireplace hung a gun and an axe. The rugged and broken table bore, amongst other things, a loaf of bread, a knife and fork, a greasy plate, some scraps of pork, a huge stoneware bottle, and a glass, still half full of spirits and water. In a darkling corner of the den was to be distinguished a sort of bed, with straw mattress and patchwork quilt. The fastidious lord of Shirley could scarcely repress a shudder at what he saw.

‘Nice little crib—tidy little box, eh, Sir R.?’ asked the ruffianly master of the hovel, jealously eyeing his visitor, as if to note the signs of disgust that his more refined associate found it so hard to repress. ‘Not quite up to the mark of your swell house in Hyde Park, though, and not good enough for a watcher or a

pig-feeder on your Shirley property. Yet it's what I've come to. No one knows what he may come to, Sir R. Shirley, Baronet—does he now? Who can tell what might happen to yourself? The cells at Millbank and Portland are trim and kept well white-washed, to be sure, and the beds are of good cocoa-nut fibre, and the gruel, and the soup, and the bread, and the eight ounces of meat free from bone—but you look quite pale, Sir R. Not ill, I hope?’

There was a malignity in the man's manner that was intentionally offensive. Sir Robert, ghastly pale, and conscious of his pallor, answered by a hollow laugh, as he tapped his polished boots with the lash of his riding-whip.

‘I do wish, Crouch, that your vivid imagination expended itself upon pleasant-

er themes,' he said; 'and, after all, why not? Here I am in Yorkshire, after a fashion by your invitation, and, as I hoped, for our mutual benefit. I have ridden over here to-day to——'

'No groom with you, eh, Sir R.?' asked Crouch, sharply.

'Certainly not,' replied the baronet, with commendable steadiness. 'I should not wish our interview, old friend, to be commented upon by the prating tongues of servants. Let us talk things over, then, and try to arrive at a comfortable conclusion.'

'I'm your man, Sir R.,' rejoined Crouch, as he pushed an empty barrel, set on end, towards his visitor. 'Pray be seated. As for me, this turf-creel, as I know, will bear my weight. We don't go in for luxuries

here. But we may as well sit down, I suppose.'

The two confederates, so ill-matched in all respects save that of unscrupulousness, sat down accordingly, confronting one another. The dogs without kept up a subdued chorus of growling. Sir Robert Shirley was the first to speak.

'Rufus, old friend,' he said, softly, 'I have not known you so long without perceiving that something has vexed you. I suspect it is the failure of your jet-hunting affair at Dutchman's Bay.'

'Would you, Sir R., I'd like to know,' demanded Crouch, very austerely, 'have liked to have had seven days' such work as never your white hands did in your life, and then, because the beast of a cliff caved in, to be cheated of your gains, and hear a

whipper-snapper of a boy like that young Don, that all the dunces here combine to worship, praised and flattered because he saved a life or two at the end of the job?’

‘Some lives, I am sure, are not worth the saving,’ answered the baronet, cordially.

‘I suppose you mean mine, Sir R.,’ resentfully retorted the ruffian opposite. ‘Because the young beggar—gentleman foundling, or whatever he is—that Mr. Don they go on about—dragged me out of the Soldiers’ Slough; and I wish he were at the bottom of the quicksand, for a conceited slip as he is.’

There was something so hideous about the savagery of the wretch, something so cynical in his coarse ingratitude, that Sir Robert, who was a gentlemanly scoundrel, felt inclined to arise in disgust, and dissolve

the unholy partnership into which he had somehow drifted. But then he was in Crouch's power, doubly so just then, for the Australian gold-digger was by far the stronger man of the two, and the bolder. The baronet was unarmed ; and Rufus had evidently been drinking, and had his sullen temper inflamed and his shrewd brains disturbed by the liquor he had swallowed. Clearly, as the hyena could not be shut up or shot, the best plan was to conciliate the hyena.

‘ I, for one, think that Mr. Don an over-rated young fellow,’ said the baronet, with feigned sincerity.

‘ So do I! So do I!’ shouted Crouch, vehemently, as he seized the big stoneware bottle and poured some of the fiery Hollands it contained into his half-emptied glass, and drained it at a draught. ‘ Con-

fusion to Don! If I could cut that young cock's proud crest, I'd die happy. And now, Sir R., I'd like to know how you speed in your wooing. Is little Miss Violet willing yet to be my lady?'

‘Have I anything to get beyond a pretty face by what you are pleased to designate as my wooing, Rufus?’ replied the baronet, with admirable patience. ‘I can't afford, as you know, to marry a portionless wife, and I should like to have a peep at that trust deed before I positively commit myself by a proposal, even were I sure of its acceptance.’

‘Now, Sir R., *do* you take me for a green hand or a gone gony? I'd be thankful to know,’ retorted Crouch, with a sort of savage jocularity. ‘*Do* you really think I keep a sort of Doctors' Commons registry, where wills can be inspected by the

public at large for the small fee of one shilling? I know what I have got to sell, and what you have got to buy, and the value of it. Heiresses, especially when they are pretty and young, with seventy thousand pounds, don't often go a-begging, I somewhat think. Set your mind at rest, Sir R., as to there being a real trust, a real sum, and heavy back dividends which represent a pretty penny. Ah! you may look about you. The document you are thinking of is not in yonder locker, nor on that shelf, nor yet in the chest in the corner. I didn't keep company with American hunters without learning what a *cache* means, or how to stow away what is best kept from prying eyes. But the question is, Sir R., whether you please the girl's fancy, or believe you do, enough to count on a "Yes" if you asked

for it. You're an old hand, and should have wheedling ways at command. And you are a man of title. Would little Miss Violet take you, if you pressed your suit? Because, if she wouldn't, it's labour lost. *I* couldn't marry her, a rough, ill-favoured chap like me,' added the digger, resentfully; 'but you are one of the smooth sort.'

'I cannot tell,' replied Sir Robert, with apparent frankness. 'These young, inexperienced girls know so little about their own hearts that an outsider may well be at fault. As a friendly acquaintance, if not as a friend, I believe Miss Mowbray does regard me. I have been able to interest her often with conversation or anecdotes about other lands and people unlike those with whom she has been brought in contact. And as my sister, Lady Thorsdale, is going to assemble a lot of fine com-

pany—or what does duty for such—at the Park, my plan was to introduce the Langtons and their beautiful ward, and in the stir and excitement of a life new to Violet to——’

‘Pop the question, eh, Sir R.?’ interrupted Rufus. ‘Ay, and see, too, that no girlish whim prevents its being answered in the affirmative. Mind also that you don’t try the dangerous game of playing fast and loose with *me*. I’m almost sick, I tell you, of this worn-out old country. As for jet-hunting, the Chinese curs that shift the refuse of our gold-heaps make a better living than we do. I dream every night of the cabbage-palms, and the blue gum-trees, and the cradle-rocking, and the claims marked out along the quartz reef. Nothing keeps me here except that seventy thousand pounds, and the heavy sum of

dividends unclaimed. You must go in and win, Sir R. Better marry than go to gaol. and that's just the choice you've got before you. They wouldn't hurt me, bless you ! I'm Queen's Evidence. But you, Sir R., would be made an example of, and if you didn't die in prison—I've known gentleman forgers and such-like pine and die so—a nice time you'd have of it when your term of penal servitude was over, and you were in town again, not daring to go up the steps of your club, and——Why, Sir R., you look as white as a turnip—you'll faint, I think. Try this.'

As Crouch spoke, he rose, snatched a wine-glass from the cumbered shelf near him, filled it to the brim with fiery liquor from the stoneware bottle, and handed it to the baronet, who accepted it with some hesitation, but swallowed its contents. 'I

think I'll go now,' said Sir Robert, rising from his seat. Nor did Rufus, who was probably satisfied with the terror his threats had inspired, care to detain his guest. He also rose from the turf-creel on which he had hitherto been seated, unbolted the clumsily constructed door, and silenced by a volley of curses and a well-aimed stone or two the frenzied barking with which the dogs saluted the stranger. 'Make your hay while the sun shines, if you're wise, Sir R.,' said the fellow, as he watched the baronet unhitch the bridle of his horse from the willow-stump, and mount, and even then there was a ring of menace in his tone.

'I shan't forget your counsel, Rufus,' replied the baronet, mildly. 'Now, good-bye,' and he rode off. Rufus Crouch, shading his restless eyes with his broad hand, watched

the figure of the retreating horseman till it was lost to sight, and then, with a chuckling laugh, as if of triumph, retired to his den.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GUESTS ARRIVE.

COMPANY at Thorsdale Park flowed in—perhaps, at first, it might be more accurate to say that it trickled in, so few were the earliest arrivals, but afterwards the supply became, numerically speaking, about equal to the demand. After all, the hospitality of an earl and a countess so rich and so well-considered is pretty sure to be accepted by a considerable number of persons. Lady Piminy had come, and had brought her three pretty daughters, giving up her

lodgings in Half-Moon Street, somewhat to the dismay of those disappointed damsels, who felt as though their prospects in life had been ruthlessly blighted by the curtailment of their trip to glorious London. But Lady Piminy had sons as well as marriageable daughters, and it was on behalf of dear, stalwart, stupid Edward and of florid Augustus, down in Warwickshire, that she had made haste to comply with the summons of her far-away cousin and potential patron, the Earl of Thorsdale. These two healthy young men were the despair of crammers, and could be coached and hustled through no sort of open examination ; but there are yet such things as direct appointments in some branches of Britannia's service, and Lord Thorsdale's solicitations, if he could only be induced to solicit, might effect more

than could be done by the persistent begging of poor Sir Nym, on whom Ministers had looked coldly ever since he had lost his seat for Freemanton.

There were others besides Lady Piminy who probably had some ends of their own to serve in accepting the invitation to Thorsdale. It was said of Lord David Todhunter that he and Lady David would go anywhere for free quarters, and lived for full nine months of every year at the expense of their various hosts. It was not Lord David's fault, of course, if his meagre income were quickly gobbled up, and if his brother, the Duke of Pentland—who, for a duke, was anything but rich—had positively refused to increase it by a single sixpence. Then there were several other cadets and distant relatives of families in the great world, and sundry personages

by far better endowed with worldly goods, but who were related to nobody in particular, and who came because in their own neighbourhoods they would derive consequence from having been the guests of an earl. And there were bachelors, whom some motive of caprice, of gratitude, or of self-seeking had induced to swell the muster-roll at Thorsdale Park.

It is one thing, of course, to collect an array of visitors in a country-house, and another thing to be successful in pleasing and amusing them, so as to keep the whole cageful of birds, so to speak, in song and in feather. Young men, in especial, are difficult to content, and they have an awkward knack of being called away on urgent private affairs, if allowed to mope through the dulness of an unoccupied day. And without young men there can be no liveli-

ness, no flirtation, no by-play of match-making—nothing to lend real interest to the country life. Lady Thorsdale had an additional difficulty to contend with in the fact that the real object of her undertaking was to divert her exacting lord from over-much brooding over his own health, and the best method of restoring it. At any moment, as she was well aware, the wind of travel might set in with resistless strength, either towards the Engadine or that yet more dreaded bourne of the Rocky Mountains, and Schültz the courier might be telegraphed for, and the noble valetudinarian be preparing for his dreary pilgrimage to the distant shrine of the eminently uncomfortable Hygeia that only dwells in desert places.

The countess, stimulated by her natural fear of Denver, Davos, St. Moritz, and

similar places of exile, did her best ; and it is wonderful how much a woman of the world can, under these circumstances, accomplish. Even in the country, even in Yorkshire, there are all sorts of things to be done when money and position go hand in hand. There were military displays. Lady Thorsdale remembered that her earl was major of the yeomanry, and colonel—honorary colonel—of the coast volunteers. Wherefore the farmers were cajoled into donning their glittering helmets and trim blue uniforms, and assembling in well-mounted squadrons for six days' drill and parade, a subsidy from Thorsdale Park taking the place of the usual Government allowance. Also the volunteers drummed and marched and saluted, and went through a sham fight, and burned powder, and blazed at targets, and played at en-

camping, and were regaled with feasts and flattery, and smartly criticised by various ex-officers of the regular profession staying at Thorsdale, and who felt the martial instinct revive in them at the sight of warlike gear and glancing arms. The earl was actually induced to mount his horse and exhibit himself in uniform, and for the moment seemed a sound man, though a couple of hours afterwards he was wrapped in flannels in an easy-chair in his own apartments, groaning and descanting on the virulence of his gout and the intensity of the symptoms. Nobody, not even experienced old Sir Joseph Doublefee, up in London, certainly not Doctor Thompson of Daneborough, or Mr. Smiles, M.R.C.S., who monopolised the local practice of Woodburn and the parts adjacent, could be quite certain as to whether Lord Thors-

dale had the gout at all, or whether, like many another vehement invalid, he was simply the self-tormenting victim of a vivid imagination, and a nervous system disordered by constant dwelling on imaginary ills.

Lady Thorsdale did her best. And, indeed, much as foreigners deplore and disdain the dulness of England, no other country can furnish so many recreations of one kind or another. There were flower-shows that were really pretty. There was an archery meeting, and there was a lawn-tennis tournament, that were almost prettier, the fair girls outshining the brilliance of the summer flowers. There was a picnic at the ruined abbey of Stonecross. Another at the ruined castle of Thrapford was projected. Then there was the Daneborough regatta, and the

yacht-race at Scoresby, and the Steepleton and Tarham athletic sports, to all of which a contingent of carriages went from Thorsdale.

There were garden-parties almost every week. Dinner-parties were frequent; concert singers of renown appeared, like highly-paid human nightingales, to warble in those evenings which might otherwise have appeared tedious; tents were pitched, and cricket played on Thorsdale Moor by enthusiastic local elevens, while the gamekeepers brought in the most roseate reports as to the broods of young grouse, and the prospects of the superb shooting to be expected in August over the wilder portions of Lord Thorsdale's great estates.

In all these efforts to please her guests, and, through them, to soothe the fickle

temper and pacify the irritable nerves of her self-tormented husband, Lady Thorsdale had two allies. The first of these was the earl's secretary, Mr. Sharpe, a clever man, whose best praise was that he knew the length of his noble employer's foot even better than his wife could do, and never gave offence. Mr. Sharpe, who perhaps did not wish, personally, to be exiled to Colorado or the Engadine, and who knew that Lord Thorsdale never grudged the cheques he drew, proved himself a first-rate purveyor of everything, from job-horses to hothouse flowers, and Covent Garden pine-apples.

Without Mr. Sharpe's assistance, there were times when even the countess would have been at fault. She wanted more servants, more carriages, more saddle-horses, more everything, and the secretary

provided these so smoothly, so unostentatiously, and with so little of friction or of delay, that the establishment at Thorsdale was strengthened almost without anyone, except the supernumeraries and their paymaster, being the wiser for it. He corresponded with the stewards of the athletic meetings and with the regatta committees, and got the earl to give a cup to one and a vase to the other: established good relations with the reporters and editors of the county newspapers; impressed wandering singers and roving bands into the service.

But Mr. Sharpe, though an invaluable auxiliary, was one of those useful functionaries whose work is performed in the background, and who, like some great generals, are unfit for service in the field. Astute as he was, he was not what ladies

call presentable, being a lame little man, who coughed when addressed by a social superior, and had never been on speaking terms with the letter H. Whereas Sir Robert Shirley, of whom his now reconciled sister habitually spoke as 'dear Robert,' was emphatically of the showy order. He was very often indeed at Thorsdale—so often that a room had been allotted to him, and he slept there or in his own house at Helston as he listed, coming and going as he pleased. But he had thrown himself heart and soul into the task of enlivening the old mansion, and had more than answered the expectations of its noble master and mistress.

Both the earl and the countess were pleased with Sir Robert. Never had the latter known him to be so good-natured, and apparently disinterested, before. He

kept the discordant elements of which the company was composed in almost chronic good-humour. It was due to him that there seemed to be some reasonable prospect of the tableaux, for which Mr. Moss of London could only provide the accessories, coming off at last. He set the right people at the right moment to play duets on the piano, so as to promote conversation or screen the whispering talk of lovers. He found out everyone's foible, trotted out old Sir Fotheringay Pipeclay on the hobby of his Indian campaigns, devised a special tableau to show off the Piminy girls, who were handsome, but mute and unimaginative, and divided the honours of the billiard-room with Captain Crasher.

Sir Robert, it has been mentioned, was a man of sundry accomplishments. He was a skilled musician and had a fine voice,

but he knew his social value too well to permit himself to be classed as a mere amateur performer. Once or twice he allowed himself to be persuaded to sing, just as, for a few moments, he let his supple fingers draw forth melody from the ivory keys of the piano. That he was adroit with the cue, the fencing-foil, the gun, and the pistol was soon patent to all, while there was a quiet dexterity in his way of handling cards which proved him to have had much experience in the manipulation of the painted paste-board. Charley Fitzgerald admitted that Shirley could ride, and Sir Harker listened with respect to his brother-baronet's opinion about horses.

The sporting men who had been asked down to Thorsdale were not in the first flight of sporting men, and they all of

them more or less deferred to one who had in his day been a turf celebrity, with race-horses of his own, and winning colours to flash past the judge's chair, and none of them accurately knew the origin or the justice of the evil reputation that now clung to the master of Shirley. Besides, such rumours surely could not be true, or Sir Robert would not have been countenanced by such exalted relatives as the Earl and Countess of Thorsdale. Wherefore the white-handed confederate of Rufus Crouch came to be accepted as an oracle by the motley society now collected at Thorsdale Park.

There are men, as there are women, whose guiding star is vanity, and who think no trouble too great, no sacrifice of ease and comfort too much, to achieve notoriety, and to strut the boards of even the tiniest

stage. Sir Robert Shirley was of another stamp of character. He found himself regarded as a lion of the true breed, and his roarings, as it were, hearkened to with admiring belief. But he would not have cared to roar merely to be rewarded by the good opinion, the ephemeral good opinion, of the incongruous set of visitors whom his sister, for a purpose, had gathered together at Thorsdale, and whom he, also for a purpose, condescended to conciliate. He had a more solid goal to reach than empty applause.

Day and night there danced before the eyes of the needy baronet, like a glittering prize that lured him on, the vision of Violet Mowbray's fortune, that seventy thousand pounds—the amount of which was doubtless swollen to still more tempting proportions by the aggregate of

dividends unclaimed. So large a sum seemed to the embarrassed master of Shirley what the fabled El Dorado did to the early Spanish conquerors of the New World as, shoeless and starving, scorched by the sun of Peru and chilled by the bitter blasts from the Andes, they struggled on towards the land of boundless wealth. Real ready money, real hard cash, would, Sir Robert felt assured, prove in his hands an enchanter's wand, by the aid of which he could effect wonders.

But two things perplexed him. In the first place, the behaviour of Rufus Crouch was very puzzling. He had to take the fellow's word for the very existence of this great sum, of which Miss Mowbray was the unsuspecting heiress. And Crouch had hitherto declined to name the price which he expected for his services. Also

Sir Robert, though he flattered himself, as such men do, that he knew women well, was not by any means certain that he had pleased Violet sufficiently to warrant his proposing himself as her husband with the quasi-certainty that the proposal would be accepted. These thoughts combined to occasion many an uneasy moment to the wily master of Shirley.

CHAPTER XIV.

PROMOTION.

‘ Good-morning, Mr. Bartlett.’

‘ Good-morning, Mr. Langton.’

Not intellectual or highly original remarks were these, no doubt, and yet the utterers of them were intelligent Englishmen enough, and each was a fair type of the class to which he belonged. What the Rector of Woodburn was we know, but Mr. Bartlett was of a different and more robust genus. He was land-agent to Lord Thorsdale, and a rich peer’s model

land-agent ought, it seems, to combine two characters: he should be a bit of a lawyer and a bit of an agriculturalist. Mr. Bartlett, whose father had filled the post before him, did combine the two characters. He was a solicitor—nominally, at least, since his only client was the Right Honourable Algernon, Earl of Thorsdale. And he was an authority on farming, though he only rented a poor sixty acres of land, and was proud when he won a medal for a prize pig at the County Show, or obtained honourable mention of his wife's fancy poultry or his wife's Jersey cows. But, if he had not a practical acquaintance with farming, he had at least a practical knowledge of farmers, knew which tenant was exhausting the land, and which doing his duty

honestly by the acres he held, and had a shrewd insight into the motives and conduct of those with whom he did business.

Such a man as Lord Thorsdale, or, for that matter, as any great landowner, has need of his Mr. Bartlett, and the net amount of his rent-roll depends very much on the sense and integrity of his land-steward. The earl, who grumbled at most people, knew Mr. Bartlett's value. He was expensive, but he was efficient. He lived near Daneborough, but there was an old steward's house touching the park where he had his land-office, and where he had rooms in which, when requisite, he could dine and sleep. Those were his real head-quarters. There he managed the bailiffs, gave interviews to the tenantry, and transacted the multifarious business

that appertains to the ownership of land. Just then Mr. Bartlett, as he encountered the rector, was in sore tribulation.

‘I have lost my best clerk,’ he said. ‘Young Carder, who was one out of fifty, has gone off suddenly to be a partner with his father and his uncle out in Ohio, in some rock-oil business, and I am left with old Screedle, who is good at accounts, but can’t ride, and gets blinder every day, and a raw lad at whom the farmers, and still more their wives, laugh when I send him on a message. You can’t manage a big estate without smart underlings to help you; nor can I be everywhere. A general wants his gallopers, and I am helpless without my aides-de-camp, and harvest coming on too. Yesterday I drove forty miles; and I sha’n’t sleep at home even to-morrow night. What I want is a

bright, brisk young fellow, who can ride a horse and drive a gig, and keep his books square, and speak up when he visits the most whimsical and proudest set of tenants that ever demanded a new barn or took offence at the idea of an alteration in their boundaries. And where am I to find him, I wonder, Mr. Langton ?’

‘I think I know,’ replied the rector, after a moment’s meditation, ‘precisely the candidate that would suit you. Only the worst of it is,’ he added, after a pause, ‘that I was mistaken in calling him a candidate, and that I am by no means sure that the lad—all that I could wish my own son to be—would desert his present ill-paid occupation, to which custom has probably endeared him, for the no doubt better-remunerated employment of which you speak. I have no hesitation

in recommending him, not in the least; but I am far from certain that, if you deemed him suitable for the post you have to fill, he would be willing to accept it.'

'Carder's salary was a hundred and fifty pounds a year,' rejoined the land-agent, promptly, 'to be raised, had he remained with us six months more, to a hundred and eighty. Screedle has two-fifty. And, if Screedle's eyes go on getting worse, the second clerk may hope to step into his shoes before we see a brace of Christmases. But then the second clerk ought to be worth his salt.'

'I think you will find my young friend and favourite pupil worth his salt,' returned the rector, smiling. 'You have heard his name, probably. It is young Don—Mr. Don, as they call him here—

abouts—the jet-hunter, old Captain Obadiah's foster-son.'

'Ay, ay!' muttered Mr. Bartlett, doubtfully, as he rattled his watch-chain. 'Yes, yes—I have heard of him—the gentleman jet-hunter—a brave lad, I am sure, and a good one, Mr. Langton, or you would not speak as you do. That young Don! No, I never saw him, but I always fancied him a vain, flighty sort of youngster, lording it over the fisher-folk because they take him for something grander than they are—bold enough, but conceited and wilful.'

'You have been much misinformed, Mr. Bartlett,' said the rector, seriously. 'Don—our Don—is the soul of modesty, as your true knight should be, with a kind word for all, and no one thinks so little of the risks he has run or the lives he has saved as does the noble boy himself. That

he is a gentleman born all believe, but he never presumes on the supposed superiority of his birth, and is to this hour the same frank, true-hearted boy that I have always found him. If you want an assistant up at Thorsdale, and Don suits you, all I could do, Mr. Bartlett, would be to congratulate both employer and employed.'

The earl's land-agent stroked his long, smooth-shaven chin. He was a shrewd, hard-headed man of business, and he took a hard-headed, and possibly hard-hearted, view of his fellow-creatures and of things in general. As a plain, sensible person, he was sceptical with regard to prodigies and people of genius. He, like others on that coast, had heard of Don and his daring, and his gentle bearing and good

brains, and was rather prejudiced against him than otherwise, because he, being so young, had earned so much of popularity and local renown. But he was staggered in his prejudice when he heard the parson speak with such unwonted warmth in praise of his young pupil. Mr. Langton, he knew, but for feeble lungs and a weakly frame, might have filled a bishop's throne with credit, and have ranked as more than an ordinary member of the episcopate in debates in the House of Lords. And Mr. Langton believed in his village hero.

‘I should like to have five minutes’ talk with the young man,’ said Mr. Bartlett, after a moment’s reflection.

‘Nothing easier,’ cheerily responded the rector, ‘since it is the time at which Don

usually comes to read with me ; and there he comes, with old Captain Jedson for once by his side.'

And indeed at that instant Don's lithe figure, accompanied by the gaunt, gigantic form of old Obadiah, came in sight. Then followed the usual greetings. The captain of jet-hunters was known to Mr. Bartlett, and indeed to almost every resident in that part of the country, and had won the respect that seldom fails to be gained by those who respect themselves, and walk with steadfast feet along the narrow path of honest rectitude. That the man was a mystic, and had wild, earnest religious beliefs, Mr. Bartlett had heard, and could fully credit. Obadiah's very aspect suggested that he had been born a couple of centuries too late, and should have worn helmet and breast-plate of steel, and

doublet of red, and charged at Dunbar, and stormed the breach at Drogheda, and trampled down Royalist fugitives at Worcester and Naseby, always with the same serene conviction that to smite Amalek and Moab was to do a good day's work in that harvest-field wherein he was a diligent husbandman. As it so fell out, Captain Jedson's battles had all been peaceful ones against wave and quicksand, and he who had in him the stout heart of a soldier was known also to possess a strange gentleness of temper and a rare unselfishness.

‘I am glad to see you at last, Mr. Don—people talk of you so much,’ said the earl's right-hand man, when the preliminary introduction had taken place.

‘I cannot tell, sir, why they should talk of me,’ replied Don, with his bright smile

and steadfast simplicity of manner; and the land-steward eyed the young man, and assured himself that the rector was right, and Don a recruit worth enlistment.

He had never before then met with a clever lad who was not pert as well as clever, excepting Carder the regretted, now rattling along towards Ohio and the paternal oil-wells. But Carder, though an excellent and hard-working youth, would have presented but a mean appearance if set beside Don, with his dark, manly beauty, and graceful, vigorous form.

Mr. Langton was the first to come to the point.

‘My friend Mr. Bartlett here,’ he said, ‘who is land-agent of Lord Thorsdale’s estate, was just telling me of a vacancy in the land-office. He has lost a good clerk, and, although I should lose a

good pupil, I have ventured, Don, my boy, to suggest that the appointment might suit you, and that you might like the vacant post.'

'Dear Mr. Langton,' said Don, turning his noble young face towards the clergyman, 'you are always kind—too kind—to me. But I am afraid I should make an indifferent sort of clerk, even if this gentleman were willing to take me in that capacity. I like books, but all my life has been spent in the free air and in exercise. We jet-hunters would be out of place at a desk.'

'Ours isn't exactly desk-work,' replied Mr. Bartlett, who began to see his way. 'Too many acres within my lord's ring-fence for that! Why, yesterday I drove forty miles, as I was telling Mr. Langton here. There are outlying portions of the

property that must be looked up every now and then. I take it for granted, Mr. Don, that you write a legible hand, and are up in the rules of arithmetic. Can you ride?’

‘Yes, a little, sir,’ answered Don, modestly.

‘Like a centaur, rather,’ put in the rector. ‘Who was it, my young friend, who broke in Farmer Barton’s chestnut colt, a vicious brute, that broke two collar-bones of my parishioners, and ignominiously unseated Joe Gripham, the Daneborough horse-breaker? I pitied poor Mr. Gripham the more because I never, personally, could keep in the saddle of any animal less patient than a Ramsgate or Scarborough donkey. An arm-chair generally suits the scholar best. But Don is a horse-man.’

‘And if Mr. Don likes to come to us at Thorsdale, with a salary of a hundred and eighty pounds and a room, I shall be glad to take him,’ said the land-agent, cordially. Don flushed crimson, and for a moment there was a sparkle in his dark eyes, but then he shook his head.

‘You are very kind, sir, and Mr. Langton is more than kind,’ he answered; ‘but I am a jet-hunter, and must live and die with those who cared for me when I was a little child.’

‘Surely, a salary of a hundred and eighty to begin, and if old Mr. Screedle the head-clerk’s eyes get worse, and he is pensioned off by his lordship, the prospect of promotion!’ expostulated the astonished manager of the Thorsdale property.

‘Don, my boy, such a rise in life for

you, in whose career I have always taken an interest !' pleaded the clergyman. But Don remained unconvinced, until his two well-wishers found an unexpected ally in grim old Obadiah, who suddenly outstretched the gaunt length of his bony arm. .

'Don, my foster-son, and my own lad,' exclaimed the old captain of jet-hunters, 'to my voice you should hearken, when it speaks, as it has ever done for your good. But yesterday, thinking of you, my bairn, I tried a fall of the holy pages, as did wise men of old, and where did the Book open ?—where, but with the story of how Joseph rose to be steward unto Pharaoh, far off in wondrous Egypt ! A jet-hunter need not always be a jet-hunter. You were always, my boy, too good to stick to the beach. And it is

borne in upon me that this offer should be closed with.'

It was agreed then that Don was to be temporarily engaged in the land-office at Thorsdale Park, in Mr. Carder's place, but that he was still to be understood to form one of the band of jet-hunters under Obadiah Jedson's command.

CHAPTER XV.

VIOLET AND DON.

It was early, very early, according to conventional notions, on a bright, breezy morning in July, and the gold-green leaves of the old oaks of Thorsdale were glibly drinking in the welcome sunbeams, and the rabbits capered and whisked among the fern of the high, sloping banks, and the dewy grass glittered as if every tremulous blade were heavy with liquid gems, when Violet Mowbray, a book in her

hand, left the house, and walked out into the park.

To explain her presence there it is necessary to say that the countess, at her brother's wish, had been particularly gracious to the inmates of the parsonage at Woodburn, had called on the Langtons, had asked them over to the Park more frequently than it suited the rector to accept her profuse hospitality, and had invited Miss Mowbray to spend a few days at Thorsdale. There was nothing remarkable in that. For an English girl to spend a considerable part of her time in paying visits is as usual as it would be unusual for a French damsel to do so. And then it came out that Violet was a remote cousin, somehow, of Lord Thorsdale, thanks to the ramifications of the noble families with which both were connected, so that the

hospitality of Thorsdale Park could be, in her case, more graciously and gracefully given and taken than if Mr. Langton's ward had belonged to the same class as did Mr. and Mrs. Langton themselves.

Miss Mowbray was an early riser, and it was to her a pleasure to be up and abroad in the fresh glory of the midsummer morning, at an hour when there were few to be encountered save some stray woodcutter or keeper on his way to a distant plantation or spinny, and before the guests in the great mansion were astir. Then, to Violet's mind, the grand old place seemed at its best, as the huge oaks rustled their wealth of leaves, and the deer trooped in antlered squadrons along the terraced uplands of the far-stretching demesne, and the pheasants showed their gorgeous plum-

age on the dark skirts of the fir-wood that was their home, and all things looked as bright and beautiful and peaceful as if there were no sin, no care, no death, no sorrow, in this lower world of ours.

One solitary spot of peculiar prettiness there was towards which Miss Mowbray never failed to wend her way. It was called locally the Black Pool, perhaps from the depth and the pellucid darkness of the water that filled the bottom of the hollow, over which aged hawthorns, that had seen more than one dynasty on our English throne, bent their gnarled branches, and exhibited, according to the season, the milk-white blossoms of hope or the ruby-red berries of maturity. A pretty place, where the fern arched high and the wild flowers nestling among the projecting roots of the hoary hawthorn-

trees seemed brighter and of richer tints than wild flowers elsewhere. There was a deer-path down to the hollow, trodden by the cloven, delicate hoofs of countless generations of the horned, half-wild race that dwelt within the park-pale—no dappled fallow deer, but the tall stags and hinds that Norman William protected by laws so cruel, and the safety of which had cost many a life and many a sentence of outlawry in the hard and selfish days of mediæval legislation.

From the Black Pool, or rather from the rising ground which formed the rim on the natural cup, hollowed out like a volcanic crater, at the bottom of which the still water lay, a fine view could be obtained both of the park and the house. The latter, which was usually styled the Hall, had been rebuilt in Queen Anne's reign,

and was a great mass of crimson brick and white stone, with the mullioned windows and the portico and massive balustrades of the period. But the architect who had reared it had spared a portion of the original structure, and two Norman towers and a gateway, and the exquisite ruins of a roofless chapel, overgrown with long grass and bindweed and ivy, remained to remind the gazer that there had existed something before the red brick epoch. There the old towers stood, grey and stern, in their warlike majesty and strength, with their narrow windows, through which the arrows of the besieged had of yore been wont to whistle, and the regular masonry of cut stone and hard mortar, which, when cannon were unknown, mocked the impotent rage of foes without. And there was the delicate tracery of the ruined

chapel of a later date, chancel and side shrines, and the oriel window, ivy-draped and mellowed by age.

Very few of the visitors at Thorsdale, with the exception of Violet, cared for the Black Pool, or for the view of the Hall and the Norman ruins to be had from thence, or, indeed, for anything more æsthetic than present amusement or ultimate profit, personal or vicarious. Lady Piminy had been shown the place, and had turned away with a shudder that was almost unaffected, remarking that the deep dark pond looked fit to drown oneself in. But Violet Mowbray had felt the enchantment of the spot, and she was fond of repairing there early on a fine morning, and before the fashionable company under the earl's roof were astir.

It has been mentioned that the deer within Lord Thorsdale's immemorial park

were no plump, lazy, fallow deer, but of the true old pre-historic breed that roamed this island before Roman galley or British coracle stemmed the narrow seas that cut us off from Gaul. And the pool was a favourite resort of the tall red deer. Violet knew this well, and had more than once looked with admiration at the line of graceful creatures as they filed down from the uplands to slake their thirst. But what she did not know was that stags, elegant and picturesque adjuncts to a pleasaunce as they may be, are in summer prone to fits of capricious ill-humour, and resent intrusion on their haunts.

So when a fine solitary stag, with wide-branching antlers, came slowly marching down the deep and narrow path that led to the Black Pool, waving his proud head from side to side, she was so far from

anticipating any possible danger that it merely seemed to her as if another element of beauty had been added to the prospect before her. She had seated herself, book in hand, on a mossy seat, formed by the contorted roots of one of the venerable hawthorn-trees that bordered the pool, and watched the stag's approach without the slightest suspicion that the creature regarded her as an enemy, and her presence as an affront.

On came the stag. That there was mischief in his rolling eye, mischief in his tossing head, an experienced park-keeper or verdurer could have read at a glance. Violet, however, noted only the grace of each successive attitude, until a low, fierce, bellowing sound betrayed the hostile intentions of the animal, which now began to gore the turf with its many-tined horns,

and to snort, and foam, and pause in its slow march to paw the ground impatiently with its sharp-hoofed forefeet—all signs of hostility which denoted that a charge was to be expected.

Our ancestors had an almost superstitious dread of the deadly results of a wound dealt by a hart's horn, which the rude surgeons of a bygone age declared to be more difficult to heal than the hurt from a wild boar's tusk. It is unlikely that Violet Mowbray had ever heard of traditions such as these, but she began to grow alarmed as the stag, red-eyed, foaming, and tossing into the air grass and leaves at every stroke of its horn, drew nearer, repeating its menacing bellow. The girl had risen from her seat and let fall her book, but she was too frightened to fly, and besides, how could her speed avail her against that of so agile an enemy.

Fascinated, like a bird that flutters close to the glaring eyes of a snake, she stood still. A man's quick tread, a man's cheering voice—yes, that meant rescue. A film seemed to come before Violet's eyes, and she sank fainting on the bank, and only recovered her consciousness to find Don supporting her.

‘You are not hurt, Miss Mowbray? No. Then all is well. There is not, I assure you, the least danger now,’ said Don, earnestly, but softly. ‘Yonder, towards the hills, you can just catch a glimpse of your late enemy.’ And indeed far off might be seen the now distant form of the defeated stag sullenly trotting along to rejoin the herd.

Violet never quite knew the circumstances of her rescue. Don, as was his habit, made light of his own prowess.

‘It was very easy,’ he said, smiling, ‘with this stout stick for a conjuring wand in my hand, to exorcise the troublesome apparition. But stags are often ill-tempered, as I am told; and it might be more prudent, Miss Mowbray, to avoid lonely places in the park, unless you are escorted. As it is, it was fortunate that I happened to be near.’

‘A kind Providence sent you to my help, I think,’ said Violet, simply. ‘I was very frightened, and gave myself up for lost. But when I heard your voice, Mr. Don, then I felt that I was safe; and so—I was very foolish.’ And she tried to smile, while tears swam in her beautiful eyes. ‘I thank you so much,’ she added, after a pause, and then she put out her little hand to her deliverer. Don took it, and for a moment could hardly resist the wild impulse that

prompted him to press it to his lips. He released it, however, and cheerfully replied,

‘You owe me no thanks, Miss Mowbray, for the little I was lucky enough to effect. Anyone else would have done as much. I happened to be crossing the park on my way to look after some woodmen who are engaged in felling trees—for I am in the earl’s employment for a time, you may perhaps remember.’

‘Yes, I recollect—I knew that,’ said Violet, glancing shyly at Don. He was differently dressed from his wont, wearing, in fact, what might be called the attire of one occupying a much higher station in life than a mere toiler on the sea-shore. But Don had looked as thoroughly a gentleman in his rough jet-hunter’s garb as in his present habiliments. He explain-

ed to Violet that the old steward's house, in which a room, or rather rooms, had been assigned to him, was close to the park, and had a side gate by which its occupants could enter the enclosure at any time on an errand of duty.'

'I am bound now, at Mr. Bartlett's wish, for the High Beeches, three miles off,' he said; 'but I shall be happy, Miss Violet, if you are now sufficiently recovered to walk, to see you safely as far, at least, as the ornamental grounds, where no deer are to be met with.'

Violet was trembling yet, but she looked at her watch, and saw that, under penalty of being late for breakfast, and thus attracting notice unwelcome to a timid girl among strangers, it behoved her to return to the Hall. Her first steps were weak and unsteady. Don offered her the

support of his strong arm, and side by side they traversed the winding path that led past bosky dell and fern-crested bank, under leafy elms and beneath spreading beeches, towards the house. They were not silent, but nothing was said as to the recent adventure. Something was said of Woodburn Parsonage, but more of Thorsdale, its grand trees, its stretching lawns, and of the Norman towers and the ruined chapel.

‘I am never tired of looking at them—when I have time, for I must not eat the bread of idleness,’ observed Don. ‘To me they are as so much history turned into stone; and since I have seen them I feel for the first time as if I understood Froissart—and “Ivanhoe,”’ he added, with a laugh. ‘I hope you don’t think it absurd in me to say so, Miss Mowbray?’

Presently they drew so near to the ornamental grounds, full of rare shrubs and flowers of lower growth than the indigenous giants of the park, that Don deemed it best to leave Violet to pursue the rest of the short walk by herself, lest her presence should be noticed and commented on. They parted then, Don striking into a path that led towards the distant uplands, while Violet threaded her way amidst the flower-beds and clumps of gay-leafed shrubs, and entered the Hall, reaching her chamber just in time to escape observation, to make some alteration in her toilet, and descend the stairs and join the company gathering for breakfast. No one questioned her, and she said nothing as to her recent peril or concerning her rescuer. That would, indeed, have been difficult for one so retiring as

herself, seeing that letters were being read, newspapers consulted, and fragmentary gossip selected from their contents retailed aloud for the benefit of all who chose to listen.

‘Jack Havant is to marry Miss Million. No mistake about it now.’

‘Don’t believe a word of it. He’s been dangling after her these three years, and old Million, who is a domestic autocrat, insists that no suitor without a coronet need apply.’

‘Yes, but that’s it. Didn’t I tell you old Lord Gosport was dead, that Jack’s father, the colonel, steps into the earldom, and Jack himself is Lord Havant now, so he’s eligible for the heiress?’

‘Here’s the last story about the Mandeville House set!’

In the midst of this Babel of tongues,

silent little Violet found her mind far away from the chatter and confusion around her.

‘Strange,’ she thought, ‘that each time I meet with this young man—this Mr. Don—my memory dwells upon every word he said, and treasures up every look he gave. I wonder why it is so?’

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.



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